

AT DEAD  
OF NIGHT







**AT DEAD OF NIGHT**

*at Night*  
series

*Edited by*  
*Christine Campbell*  
*Thomson*

1. NOT AT NIGHT
2. MORE NOT AT NIGHT
3. YOU'LL NEED A  
    NIGHTLIGHT
4. GRUESOME CARGOES
5. BY DAYLIGHT ONLY
6. AT DEAD OF NIGHT

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Selected and Arranged by  
CHRISTINE CAMPBELL THOMSON



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# AT DEAD OF NIGHT

## Creeping Fingers

LORETTA G. BURROUGH

I WAS so dead tired that the snow swirling about my face, and the cold wind blowing in chill gusts down the side streets, were the only things that kept me from falling asleep on my feet. Had it not been for the storm, I could have cheerfully leaned against a wall and closed my eyes, but its fierce violence drove me onward through the snow drifting high, and the fierce blasts of the mid-western blizzard. I kept saying to myself: "Not much farther now, and then a bath, and bed," but it was queer how the few blocks from the station to the hotel stretched themselves. An Olympic runner at the end of a long race could not have been more tired than I when at last I crawled through the revolving doors into the hot, glaring warmth of the foyer of the Hoffman House, Benton's hotel.

I wanted only one thing, room and bath, and said as much to the drowsy night clerk, stodgily on duty at the desk.

"Room and bath, sir?" he said, conserving his words with the economy of the weary. "'Fraid not."

"What do you mean, 'fraid not?'" I demanded.

"Convention here at Benton, no room."

"No room! Well, where the devil do you expect me to sleep? In the station? I've been travelling two days and nights, and a bath and room I will have."

I was angry, with the sudden heat of the worn-out. We stood at an impasse, I glaring heatedly at the clerk, and he staring dazedly at me, quite unable in his experience to find any solution for the problem.

"What's this, Kennedy? Being insolent to a guest?" A large, robust gentleman stood at my elbow.

The clerk shuffled into an alert attitude.

"No, sir. Mr. Hardy, this gentleman wants a room and bath, and I was telling him on account of the convention we haven't any."

"You see," I explained, "I'm dog-tired. I've been on the road for weeks; I've just made a long sleeper jump, and I want a room and bath. This is the only decent hotel in town, so I came here."

"I see, sir," the manager was very deferential. "Well, we'll see if we can't possibly fix you up. Are *all* the rooms occupied?" he asked, turning to the clerk.

"Yes, Mr. Hardy."

"Um. This convention . . . well, how about 317?"

"That's empty, of course."

"Um."

"Well," I said, breaking in as the prospect of a haven began to show through the murk, "if 317's unoccupied, I shall take it!"

The manager stood there a moment, saying nothing.

"You see," he began, "317's not occupied much. People complain of the location or something; they say it's too cold. I shouldn't advise you to take the room, sir. People don't like it. However, it is the only unoccupied one to-night. It has a bath attached."

"I don't care anything about the location. If there isn't any objection, I shall take it. Particularly since it has a bath attached."

"Well, perhaps I should suggest, if you took just the room, and didn't use the bath? The bath isn't opened much, it's rather damp. People don't like it."

I stood staring at him, wondering what could ail this manager who could find so few good points about his rooms. He had been anxious enough to find a place for me before. But I could not but pause to wonder about his vagaries. With all its drawbacks, real or imaginary, 317 had begun to appear to me a haven of rest.

"I shall take it, damp, bad location, too chilly, everything, *with* bath attached."

The manager stood there a moment longer, then, with a shrug, said: "Certainly, sir," and called, "Front."

The boy took my bags, which by now I thought had begun to wear through the muscles of my shoulders, and led me to a gusty elevator that creaked its way upward for two stories, then along hot and carpeted corridors, past closed doors through which I could hear blasts of merry-making from the convention, into a long and narrow passage, remote and quiet, and noticeably chill and draughty. He paused before a door at one end of the corridor, and began to fumble with the key in the lock. I stood beside him, noticing the quiet of the passage as compared with the robust noise of the other corridors. "Very quiet here, isn't it?" I said.

"Yes, sir," the boy looked up. "You see, this is the only bedroom on the gallery. The others," he gestured to other dark brown doors opening out on to the worn, red-carpeted hall, "are just store-rooms, for odds and ends, and linen, and things like that. This room ain't used much, it ain't used at all, that is to say. Not lately, that is. It's sort of damp and chilly, people say."

"Damp and chilly? Why should it be damp and chilly? This isn't the seashore."

"I dunno, sir." The boy had the key in the lock, and the door opened. A gust of swamp-like chill rushed out to meet us, as palpable as a rush of wind.

"Shut the windows in here," I said, advancing into the room behind him. "It's damned cold."

"They're shut, sir," he muttered, slipping the electric switch, and letting a flood of chill white glare over the room.

I went over to the flaky radiator immediately, and bent to turn on the heat. The steam immediately hissed through the pipes loudly. "It's funny," I said, looking at the boy, who stood near the door, "this room's as cold as the inside of a tomb."

"Yes, sir, people complain about it, and don't stay."

"Well, I don't care," I looked about me once more; "all I want is a bath and a bed to sleep in."

"Yes, sir." I handed him his tip, and he hurried out, his footsteps beating a rapid retreat down the corridor, toward warmth, I fancied.

The cheerless room was still as cold as the inside of a

refrigerator car although the heat was now dancing through the pipes and quivering above the radiator. "It'll have to warm up soon," I said to myself, and began to take off my clothes. When I had got half-way undressed to the tune of the noisy pipes and the battering of the wind and the sleet, I went to the bathroom to turn on the hot water for my bath.

When I entered the room, I was startled. It was almost as large as an old-fashioned kitchen; it was cold, and damp, and dark, and the huge old tub had high sides. It looked like one of those old monstrosities that had been current in the early day of plumbing, and the whole room had the air of being out of place. It was hideous and cheerless.

I shivered and went back into the cold bedroom, well understanding the state of mind that could prompt people to give up the barren, unpleasant room. I sat on the edge of the bed, half-awake, and listened to the monotonous sound of the bath filling. It was the only noise I could hear, although I listened carefully. No sound of distant revelry reached me, no noises from the street. I got up and moved to the window, pulling aside the skimpy curtain. I looked down upon a cheerless row of empty stables around a dark alley, utterly lonely and abandoned-looking, under the faint light of a feeble arc. Over everything the snow eddied about in drifting gusts.

"God," I said, "what a prospect! That and the cold combined must have discouraged the tenants."

I turned back into the room, wondering why an hotel could be such an incredibly dreary place, particularly a country hotel. After a while, when the bath began to sound as if it were full, I picked up my fresh pyjamas, and opened the bathroom door. I stared a moment, gasped, and pulled on the electric light switch. The light from the high white globe streaked out over the bare room and the deep shadow cast by the basin, into the bottom of the tub, filled with green water swirling and steaming, sending up hot smoke into the cold air.

I gazed a long moment into the bottom of the tub, and laid my pyjamas over the side of the stool, shivering and feeling decidedly ill. For, in that long moment before I had switched on the light, I had fancied I had seen someone lying supine in the bottom of the tub. I went over to it and

stared down into its depths, between the chill, greyish-looking marble sides to the bottom where the hot water was steaming and gurgling and bubbling as the cascade from the pipe fell fountain-like downward. It was empty; the faint shadow that I stooped down to touch was my own, cast by the ceiling light, like a small sun, that hung obliquely above my head. I shivered a bit in the damp air; despite the hot vapour of the steam that was now filling the room, the air was still chill and faintly redolent of the earth, the odour of a necropolis in the rain. I looked about me, and wondered where the odour could be coming from, and what made these two rooms so cheerless and repulsive, and, I fancied, so malignant. And what was it I fancied I had seen prostrate in the bottom of the tub?

I went back to the doorway and stared again into the room, at the tub, after switching off the light. The little oblong of yellow light from the bedroom streamed in upon the greyish marble of the floor, and my shadow stood before me, long and inquiring, with distorted head turned questioningly toward the high bulk in the corner of the room, but that was all. There was nothing lying, long and horribly supine and limp, in the bottom of the high white tub.

I grunted, whether in satisfaction or in annoyance at myself, I could not tell, turned on the light, slipped off my bath-robe, and stood testing the heat of the water with my finger. I let a little cold water out of the faucet, and then got into the tub. I had realized how high the thing was when I stood looking at it, but when I lay down in it, the white sides seemed to come suddenly together over my head, and I sat up, startled. The depth of it was extraordinary, and I decided that it must certainly have originated in some bygone age of plumbing, for such monstrosities were not tolerated to-day. Sitting upright as I was, the top of the tub was on a level with my eyes, and lying down, I could see nothing but its sides and the high, cold-looking globe of the ceiling light which shed its sickly glow over the room.

But I was tired, worn out, and the water that gurgled loudly from the pipes, in the silence, was hot and soothing to my weary body and fatigued nerves. Hideous though the room was, hard the storm that banged at the window, and cold and

repulsive the tub, at least I could build for myself, with hot water and soap, a little haven against the harshness of my surroundings.

I lay down in the bottom, and again experienced the sudden sensation that the sides were closing around me, but this time I did not sit up, for I was growing warm, and sleep, like a hot blanket, was closing around my nerves and brain. I lay still, and may have dozed, thinking of home and the happy fact that I would soon be there.

Then, slowly, I began to grow conscious again, dully, sleepily, with my brain functioning as if in a dream. I grew aware of the fact, as if beneath a layer of wool that was gently numbing my faculties, that somewhere near at hand a door had very softly closed. I lay there a while softly mulling it over, drawing from it no meaning, foggily arguing with myself, wondering. One of the servants, perhaps, had closed a door along the corridor. No, it had sounded nearer than that, much nearer. I didn't know, I couldn't bother. I was growing drowsy again, sinking easily along pleasant paths down to a blissful know-nothingness when a voice within my brain shouted violently: "Wake up! Save yourself!"

My eyes jerked open as if by cords that had suddenly contracted, and the sweat of sudden fright stood out on my forehead. Convulsively, every muscle in my body jerked and stiffened, and my hands closed into fists. What was it, that sudden voice that shocked me into alertness, what was it that had startled me out of the mists of weariness and sleep, what was there to be afraid of? I stared about me and sat up. Nothing was changed in the room, nothing was out of order. The cheerless cracked sink still stood in the corner, and one of its taps still drearily dripped; over the peeling yellow stool were thrown my clean pyjamas and a towel, and my tooth-brush and the red tube of paste still lay upon the basin. Whence, then, came that extraordinary impression that something was different? Nothing was different; the air was still as funerally cold, the storm still sucked about the windows, and yet change there was; something had changed that subconsciously I did not like. I stared at the sides of the tub, turned away, then violently turned back. What were they, those pools of mist?

On a level with my eyes, upon the chill surface of the marble edge were five little circles of mist, fluctuating, moving, and ominous. I couldn't understand them, and I stared again. Five pools of mist spaced unevenly apart, four close together, and one a little distance of a few inches away from the others. Suddenly they lifted and dissolved away, then again they reappeared, a little nearer to me, at a different place. Stupidly I put out my hand and laid it on the side of the marble to brace myself, lifted it off again, and stared at the impression of five circles of rapidly dissolving mist that it had left. What was it, then, whose five fingers made those little pools of mist—just like the fading spots left by my fingers—what was it, then, that had its hand on the side of the tub?

I crowded back against the far wall and watched that marble expanse where the five imprints moved. An instant, and suddenly, with a pounce, the impression of five fingers was not alone. A foot away, and as clearly and distinctly as warm fingers print on ice, the imprint of another hand stood out, and immediately I became conscious of the change in the room that had bothered me before. I looked breathlessly toward the door, and saw, instead of the lamp with its circle of light on the bedroom table, only the closed dark brown panels of the bathroom door. It was shut, and I had left it open. What, then, was it that had come through the door, softly shutting it behind it, when I was half-asleep? What, then, was it that was shut up with me in the room, and had its invisible hands on the side of the tub? I looked at the pools of mist, not calmly, but with a choking sensation that I had become tangled in a web of madness, that it was a horrible nightmare and could not last. I could not move; my starting eyes were fixed on those melting and moving impressions on the marble. Another moment, and I could find my voice and cry out, but not now. Suddenly I could almost see the marble spurned; the fingerprints were gone; malignantly, the hands were free. Something that I could not see was coming at me over the side of the tub.

I turned my head away, and cried out in a voice that terror lent power to. I felt myself slipping darkly into the water, sensation ebbing away into a chill blackness that was quiet and cold and burned with light that dashed across darkness.

"Now," a voice was speaking very far away, "when he wakes up give him something very light, Miss Daly, nothing heavy, not even if he asks for it. And remember, absolutely no conversation. If he wants to talk, if he starts asking questions, simply refuse to speak to him. I'll be in first thing in the morning."

The voices moved away, and I opened my eyes, painfully. I was warmly heaped with blankets, and the fresh odour of clean wool filled the room. The place was unfamiliar and warm, and a spoon stood in a glass on the table, and beside it a bottle. I opened my mouth to call, and found I could not. My throat was exceedingly raw, and I felt as if I had been smothered in water, but I lay there, my eyes on the bright glow of the unfamiliar lamp, and my brain idly tracing the pattern on its shade. I knew there were things I should be thinking of, puzzling over, but with every muscle aching and my whole body and brain a raw torture, I wanted only to sleep.

The door opened, and the nurse came in, brisk, pleasant, bright-faced. "Awake, are you? How do you feel?"

"Sick," I groaned. "What's this all about, anyhow? Where am I?"

"Never mind." She busied herself, with the peculiar industriousness which is the characteristic of nurses. "You're to rest, and sleep, and that's absolutely all. Now I'll get you some tea and toast."

She was gone, and when she came back with the food, I ate it, and went to sleep soon after.

A week later I was sitting in the office of the manager of the Hoffman House, a glass at my side and a cigar between my lips, and listening.

"Well," he began rather awkwardly, his eyes on the rug beneath his feet, "I'm awfully sorry about this matter, Mr. Kent. I know it's been a terrible experience for you."

I nodded, and before my eyes rose the picture of that damp, chill room, the wisps of steam from the bath curling up into the dank air, and the high walls of the great tub rising about me and shutting out everything except the frozen-looking globe of the light. And again I seemed to hear a door close

softly, and again I seemed to stare at changing pools of mist moving on marble's surface. . . . I shuddered and lifted the full glass to my lips. I could never forget that experience; a week's trying had only dimmed the first raw horror a little.

"Now," I said, setting down the glass suddenly, "I want to hear an explanation. I have been put off for a week, and the whole thing haunts me. Please tell me what it means."

"I don't know that I should tell you. Perhaps the whole thing might better be forgotten. Of course, you know the rooms are being dismantled, and will be used again only for storage?"

I nodded. I had heard the sounds of hammering and moving going on near me for several days, and I had asked the nurse what they were doing. I was glad they were breaking up the rooms. At least they would no longer have a concrete existence.

He took his gaze from the carpet and looked at me.

"This whole thing happened before I became manager of the hotel, so I had no personal knowledge of the matter. . . . Anyhow, well, you want to hear what happened the night you were in there." He gestured toward the ceiling, and I knew he referred to my unfortunate occupancy of 317 and bath.

"Yes," I said, and he went on.

"That night everything was going on quite as usual, when I happened to stroll down the corridor on which 317 was situated." He paused, and seemed to shiver. "I was going to check up on the housekeeper's tally of the linen, which hadn't quite suited me, and I noticed how infernally damp the passage was. This was about half-past eleven, you know, about an hour after you'd gone up to the room. I went into the store-room, and was taking stock of the linen in the closets, and so forth, when I heard you yell. Well," he paused and took a sip from his glass, "I ran out to the corridor—I knew where it came from, of course—called for help at the top of my voice, and then tried to get the door open. In a minute there was a crowd of bellboys and guests around me and all together we broke down the door. Well, you weren't in the bedroom, so we went to the bathroom door. It wasn't locked, because it hadn't any key, you know, but we couldn't open it. And all the time we could hear you inside, drowning. We

didn't waste any time, as you can imagine. We broke the door down at last and got you out just in time. The doctor said a little more immersion would have finished you. I had you brought to the best room in the hotel, got a doctor and nurse, and here you are. . . ."

He looked up, and smiled, and I realized that the experience was one that the manager of the Hoffman House would not forget very quickly. Standing in that damp, cold corridor, alone, and hearing me cry for help in the accents of insane fright, was something that would tend to remain in a man's memory.

"Yes," I said, "here I am, a little the worse for wear, and very bewildered." I told him my story, from my first impressions of the rooms to my last moment when I felt myself sinking into the deep water. When I finished, he nodded very quietly.

"I thought it was something like that. The rooms have a vile reputation; it's just as well they're being broken up. I'll tell their story and perhaps it will explain things a little, I don't know. Anyhow," he took another long drink from the glass at his elbow, and resumed, "'317 was taken three years and a week ago, to be exact, by two men, an old man very feeble, and a much younger man, uncle and nephew they were. Anyhow, that night the young man drowned his uncle in the bath-tub, and disappeared. He was tracked down later, and hung."

I shivered. The rooms had been the scene of murder, then. No wonder their air of being consecrated to evil. The door that had been shut so strangely on the night that I was there had been shut those years before by the murderer. Just so had he crept in, hidden by the high sides of the tub, then, when the old man lay unsuspecting, laid his hands on the side of the marble, and a moment later . . . It must have been easy to do, considering the age of the victim and the youth and strength of the murderer, to push him beneath the water and hold him there, until his last struggles were over. I shivered at the ugly picture, and the strange closeness of my escape.

"That's not all," the manager went on. "The next year it didn't happen to be occupied, on the fifteenth. The year

after that, last year, it was occupied, and a man was found drowned in the tub the next morning—accidentally, we thought, of course. And the night you were there was the third anniversary. You see, I wasn't manager at the time all these things happened, and I didn't have facts at first hand, or I would have thought twice about letting you take the room. But you were so insistent, so I . . . anyhow, I've had one coincidence too many; so the rooms are being torn down, and won't be used for living purposes any more."

"A damn good thing," I said, picking up my hat from the table, and lifting my suit-case. And as he turned to go with me to the door, I realized unhappily that never again would I see a bath-tub without a psychic shudder stirring at the roots of my hair, and that of all the numbers and all the possible combinations of numbers in the world, "317" was the one I would never be able to forget.



# The Owl

F. A. M. WEBSTER

ALISON MERCER was one of the loveliest creatures ever created by the good God. In her case, moreover, beauty was something more than merely skin deep. One came to gasp at the sheer loveliness of her pale face, and the perfect proportions of her slim body, but stayed to wonder, as the days went by, and one came to realize the greater beauties of her stainless soul.

What a girl she was! Pure gold clean through, body and soul alike, all white-hot youth and innocence, unafraid and utterly unsoilable. That was Alison Mercer.

And, because she was what she was, her friends turned up their eyes in horror when they heard of her engagement to Simeon Stroud.

Why did she accept his proposal of marriage? You'll have to ask her father about that. You see, no one knows what passed between old Tom Mercer and Alison, that time she came back from a ski-ing holiday in Scandinavia. All Alison saw was that the old man had aged about a hundred years in less than thirty days, and her deep, sea-green eyes went wide with worry.

"Daddy, *darling*," she expostulated, "you've been gambling again!"

"Nothing much, m'dear—bit of a flutter," mumbled old Tom uncomfortably. "Leastways, that's what it looked like at first. Hell! How was I to know the durned stock was going to drop twenty points in twenty-four hours?" he exploded. "A fellow gave me a sure tip, I tell you. I can't explain how the certainty came unstuck. All I know is that the chap who landed me in the cart is willing to do the right thing by me. He's awfully anxious to meet you, Alison!"

"Is he, Daddy? Well, I'll try to be extra nice to him, if he's going to help you out of your troubles."

Tom Mercer shot a queer, sidelong look at his daughter, and his eyes were very anxious.

"You'll find Stroud a sound sort of fellow," he suggested.

"What is he, Daddy, a financier, or a company promoter?"

"Neither, my dear. He's by way of being a famous archæologist and is a great authority on ancient South American civilizations. He's only just back from a big exploration in those parts. I thought he'd know what he was talking about, or I shouldn't have put money into Chilean Nitrates."

"Ugh," shuddered the girl, "those old Aztecs worshipped birds and wore cloaks of feathers. I can't bear birds, so I hope we'll be able to keep him off that subject."

Strangely enough, Alison's first impression of Simeon Stroud, when he came to Horley Grange and was presented by her father, awakened in her mind all the horrors of her secret pet obsession. Some people can't stay in the same room with a cat, others can't stand the sight of snakes or spiders. Alison Mercer couldn't abide the touch of a bird and, once, when a girl friend had caught a sparrow and placed it, fluttering, in Alison's hand, she had fainted clean away. She loved all God's creatures—don't let there be any mistake about that—but there was something about the smoothness of a bird's breast and the palpitation of a bird's wings that made her feel physically sick.

And Simeon Stroud was like a bird. Not a decent daylight warbler, but some beastly nocturnal fowl, that flew on silent wings and peered in through sleeping people's windows, with horrible, luminous eyes. Such night-fowls live on flesh. But there was nothing predatory about Simeon Stroud's appearance. Upon the other hand, one gathered the impression that this little man was abnormally wise; but one felt, also, that his knowledge was abysmally evil. Further than that, he had a quick way of turning his head sharply from side to side, and of shooting furtive, inquiring glances all over the place, while he spoke in a queer, twittering sort of voice. His nose, set between wide, staring eyes, descended almost straight from below his forehead and ended in a sharp, under-turned point. A soft, fluffy fringe of hair, which encircled his face from one ear to the other, did not improve his appearance.

Despite an almost nauseating feeling of revulsion, Alison—probably for the sake of her father—accepted the advances of this strange suitor. The first time he embraced her the girl nearly fainted, for that fluffy fringe of face-hair, which he favoured, felt horribly soft—just like the breast feathers of a bird, in fact. Her whole body went cold and rigid with sheer, stark terror at his touch, and yet she contrived to accept that first caress without betraying her true feelings.

Most people in Horley referred to the newly-engaged couple as “Beauty and the Beast”, but there was one acknowledgeable student of mythology who likened them, artfully enough, to Pallas Athene and her owl.

Alison feared a scene when a light-hearted friend disclosed the nature of their latest nick-name, for she knew the violence of her fiancé’s temper. But, far from being displeased, Stroud positively preened himself, smiling oddly all the time, and finally gave himself a quick shake, for all the world like a bird ruffling up its feathers to get the dust out of them.

“After all,” he said quietly, ‘Pallas Athene was one of the most beautiful and virtuous of the goddesses of ancient Greece, while it is generally conceded that the owl is the wisest of birds.”

“Well, let’s hope you won’t develop its nocturnal habits after you are married, Mr. Stroud,” teased the irresponsible visitor.

When they were alone that evening, Alison looked long and thoughtfully at her future husband. He had evidently found that the cap, supplied by the nick-name, was a good fit, and was well content to wear it. He really was rather like an owl, she told herself, and, for the first time, out there in the half-dark of the veranda, she noted the queer, luminous quality of his tawny-gold eyes. Then, as she continued to study him, she saw that the tops of his ears were Puckishly pointed.

An involuntary shiver ran through her, but she allowed no sign of distress to escape her when he rose presently and came to kiss her good night. When she was alone, however, her head dropped to her folded arms and her slim shoulders heaved spasmodically. They were to be married soon and, after that, there would be no blessed hours of darkness and peace and solitude to follow after that detested evening

embrace. She would be the property of Simeon Stroud, body and soul, and again she shuddered at the thought, while there broke from her lips a pitiful little cry: "I am doing it all for you, Daddy; I am doing it all for you!"

A week before Alison's wedding was due to take place, Hugh Davenant arrived home in England. He went straight from the boat to stay with his married sister at Exton, a small village a couple of miles beyond Horley. Next morning he drove into the town to make some much-needed additions to his wardrobe, for he had worn nothing but the thinnest of garments in the South American tropics, and such European suits as he had brought home with him had been purchased ready-made, and were appallingly badly cut. His sister was unable to accompany him, but he had something to tell her upon his return at lunch-time.

"They say that the world's a small place," he announced, as he unfolded his dinner napkin, "and I'm beginning to believe it."

"Did you run across a pal in Horley, Hugh?" inquired his brother-in-law.

"God forbid that I should ever call Simeon Stroud a pal of mine," Davenant answered piously.

"So you know our local 'lion', do you, dear?" queried his sister. "He settled among us about twelve months ago. You'll meet his future wife this afternoon. She's coming over for tennis."

Hugh put down his knife and fork hurriedly, and there was a look of real concern on his clear-cut, handsome features.

"Do you mean to say that *that* man is going to be married?" he queried.

"Yes, dear, and to a most charming girl. But why do you ask? He's supposed to be tremendously rich."

"Listen, Claudia," said Hugh, "Simeon Stroud may be as rich as Croesus, for all I know. That doesn't alter the fact that he's a most unutterable swine. The South American Indians could tell you some queer tales of his cruelties. But, apart from that, I happen to know that he got mixed up with the followers of some horrible, filthy sect out in South America, people who claim to be descendants of the old Aztec priests. Between them they tried to revive some ancient form

of bird worship; but, when it came to a question of permitting the sacrifice of young girls to a heathen deity, even a corrupt South American government stuck in its toes, and wouldn't stand for that sort of thing."

"My Lord! Someone ought to warn Alison's father," broke in Lambert.

"I think you'd find it a pretty thankless task," responded his wife. "Most people imagine that Tom Mercer has sold Beauty to the Beast."

"That's bad," commented Davenant. "Is she a nice sort of girl?"

A slow smile spread over Claudia Lambert's features. "You just wait until you see her, my lad," she answered.

When Alison arrived at the Lamberts' place that afternoon, the party was in full swing and Hugh giving an amazing display of agility on the tennis-court.

The girl stood quite still, and her breath ceased for an instant, as she caught sight of the players; for that lean, bronzed man who bounded agilely about the court with wonderful athletic ease, provided the very beau-ideal of all her dreams; and she knew, instinctively, that his hand was of the right size to hold her heart.

"I wonder whether you are admiring my brother's super-abundant energy or his personal appearance most?" said Claudia softly, and Alison came out of her reverie with a self-conscious start.

"He's rather a dear," went on Claudia, "and his fitness is perfectly amazing, for he was very badly gassed, to say nothing of being buried alive, when a land mine was blown up during the War. By the way, Alison, he's just come home from the parts of South America where Mr. Stroud made all his discoveries. So you'll have something in common to start with when I introduce him to you presently."

It was not, however, of South America that Hugh talked to Alison when Claudia presented him at the conclusion of the set. In point of fact he seemed, rather, to go out of his way to avoid touching upon that particular topic. When Alison asked him, point-blank, if he knew her fiancé, he replied shortly that he had met him.

After that first meeting the affair developed with amazing

rapidity. If one believed in the existence of such mysterious affinities as "soul-mates", one would have said that Alison Mercer had found hers, with her first sight of Hugh Davenant, playing tennis, like a lambent flame, on the Lamberts' court. Expressed in more mundane speech the fact remains that she fell head over heels in love with him right away. And, because this was so, and because she was intensely loyal to her father and to the promise she had given to Simeon Stroud, she seemed, to Hugh, inexplicably cold at their next meeting.

It was the day after the Lamberts' party, and Hugh had induced his sister to take him to call at Horley Grange, because he intended dropping a hint of warning in old Tom Mercer's ear. It wasn't an easy task to perform, for Alison's father was most mysteriously "in funds", wherefore, from that old reprobate's point of view, "everything was for the best, in this best of all possible worlds".

None the less, Hugh knew a great deal more about the activities in South America of Simeon Stroud than he had let fall at his sister's luncheon-table. He had heard tales of a temple, hidden away in the secret heart of the forest, where men made human sacrifice to a bird which, even allowing for the extravagance of native legends, must be something quite abnormal in the avian world. Once, on a hunting expedition in that same forest, he had found the body of a young girl, frightfully and filthily mutilated, and with the eyes pecked out. Upon another occasion he had met a newly-blinded man who ran screaming through the trees, with blood streaming from features which had been torn to ribbons by rending talons.

These things he had seen with his own eyes. And men said that it was Simeon Stroud, who had discovered the secrets of long-dead Aztec priests, selling his soul in exchange for those secrets, who had revived the awful rites attendant upon the worship of the Great Bird.

Tom Mercer laughed, but took no offence, when his young visitor hinted that he should, as a father, make further inquiries before permitting his daughter's marriage to take place.

"You're a sly dog, Davenant," he chuckled, "and Alison is a wonderfully desirable girl, but I'm afraid you're a bit

too late in the field. We are under great obligations to Simeon Stroud."

They had been pacing the terrace of Horley Grange as they talked, but now Hugh Davenant stopped suddenly in mid-stride.

Was he in love with this glorious girl who had come so suddenly into his life? Pity? Ah, yes! He had pitied her from the bottom of his heart, ever since he had heard that she was destined to marry Simeon Stroud. But, even though pity is so close to love, as hate is akin to fear, the notion of loving her, himself, had never entered his head, until Tom Mercer had made his covert suggestion.

Then, as they stood there, the girl came round the corner of the house and the man knew, recognizing the finger of Fate as clearly as the girl had done yesterday, when she had seen him for the first time upon the Lamberts' tennis-court, that he loved Alison Mercer with all his soul.

The wonder and the glory of the great revelation held him, however, for but the briefest instant. There was something woefully amiss with the present situation. Why were Alison's cheeks wet with tears? What could have happened to bring to her eyes, which normally reflected nothing but the serenity of her soul, that look of sheer, naked terror that now informed them? Why was she trembling, and why came and went her breath in little frightened gasps?

Behind her stood Simeon Stroud, who might have answered all those questions.

At the sight of her parent, the last shreds of a tremendous determination, which had sustained her, deserted Alison Mercer. With a little stifled cry, half-tears, half-laughter, she ran to her father, drawing his protecting arms closely about her body and hiding her face upon his breast.

"Why, my precious, why now, what's amiss?" he soothed her, and his voice was wonderfully tender.

"Oh, Daddy, it was awful, awful!" sobbed the girl. "We were watching the sunset, Simeon and I, and, although the light has not yet gone, a great white owl came flying silently out of the woods and settled on my shoulder. It was an owl, and yet it was different to any owl I have ever seen, and, oh, Daddy, it was utterly evil!"

"There, there, little one, come along to old Nannie, she'll stay with you, while you lie down for a bit. Simeon, will you look after Davenant? I'll be coming back with a shotgun shortly, I'm not too fond of owls myself."

"I am sorry," Stroud answered, "but I have an important letter to write before the mail leaves. Perhaps Mr. Davenant will excuse me?"

When Mercer returned to the terrace a few minutes later he carried a loaded gun tucked under his arm and his face was very grave.

"Davenant, my boy," he volunteered, "I'm a bluff, John Bull sort of chap, without much imagination, probably, but I'm damned if I like this business!"

"Miss Mercer has told you what really happened then?" Hugh questioned sharply.

"Yes, it appears that Stroud got a bit amorous, round there at the back of the house. Alison swears that when she refused to allow him to kiss her, in full view of the windows of the servants' quarters, he lost his temper and uttered a most peculiar cry. Whereupon, or so she says, that blessed, great owl that scared her so badly came winging up from the woods. It may be only her imagination, of course, but she declares that the bird flew straight for her eyes, and only settled on her shoulder at a word from Stroud. I suppose you don't think there is anything in all this business?"

Hugh did not reply. For long moments he remained leaning against the balustrade, while he puffed thoughtfully at his pipe. Then he, in his turn, asked a question.

"One hates to work on hearsay, Mr. Mercer," he stated apologetically, "but local gossip has it that Stroud has got you under his thumb. You can tell me to mind my own business if you like, of course; but, frankly, just how deeply are you in his debt?"

"I owe him £20,000."

"Was the advance made *after* he became engaged to your daughter?"

"Yes," said Mercer, speaking very low, and the red colour which flushed his face was no reflection of the setting sun.

Hugh dropped a kindly hand upon the old fellow's shoulder. "Transfer your debt to me," he said. "I don't

pretend to be a millionaire, but I'd pay a good deal more than the money you owe Simeon Stroud to secure your daughter's happiness."

Tom Mercer looked this sudden saviour in the eyes with startled delight. "Why, yes," he breathed. "That would be one way of setting Alison free, wouldn't it?"

The girl herself reacted strangely to the news of her release from the hateful engagement, to which she had committed herself for her father's sake. Old Tom, who insisted upon acquainting her with the glad tidings, just as if her salvation was entirely of his own devising, wished to save her the painful task of giving her fiancé his *congé* in person. But to this plan she would not consent.

"No, Daddy," she said firmly, "we're treating Simeon pretty badly, anyway. The least I can do, in common decency, is to see him and tell him how sorry I am if the breaking off of our engagement should cause him any pain."

"Spoken like my own brave, little girl," said her father heartily. "But, at least, you must let me be present at the interview."

Alison smiled as she shook her head, but she was neither smiling, nor feeling particularly courageous as she took her way to the dark house where Stroud lived, deep in the woods.

She found him seated in a deep chair in his gloomy, book-lined library. When he rose to greet her, and would have taken her in his arms, she pushed him gently away.

"Simeon," she said, pausing just inside the door, "I am afraid I have come to hurt you. This engagement of ours has been all a dreadful mistake. I have never loved you; and Simeon, there is something about you—something bird-like—that simply terrifies me. I have tried to go through with it, for my father's sake; but, oh, Simeon, I just couldn't face it all, when it came to the final pinch."

Stroud returned to his seat without a word, and then the girl realized, with a half-stifled gasp of horror, that a great owl had fluttered silently out of the shadows and was perched upon the high back of its master's chair. The fascination of the moment was frightful. Man's and bird's alike, the two pairs of eyes fronting her glowed luminous and golden in the half-dark. Man and bird alike seemed to brood, with

heads sunk forward; and the girl saw, with a shudder, that each had sharply-pointed ears; but, whereas those of the great bird were feathered, those of the gross man were tip-pointed with tufts of hair.

"So," sneered Simeon, "you do not find yourself able to love me, my fair Alison?"

"Oh, please, I'm so sorry," she broke in.

The man silenced her with never a gesture, never a movement, but only by the luminous intensity of the stare he turned upon her. And, from close beside his head, the owl stared at her too.

"I was not thinking of you or me," he answered in his soft, bird-like voice. "I was only pitying your father, who must suffer for this sudden folly of yours."

Something in the covert sneer aroused the girl's anger.

"My father will pay you back the money with which you sought to buy me," she flared back at him.

The man rose slowly to his feet and moved towards her down the length of the room. And, as he came, the owl fluttered up from the back of the chair and floated forward, not a foot above his head. Bird and man, together, they presented an awful picture of incarnate evil. Alison shrank back with a low moan of fear, for Simeon Stroud's hand was rising, each moment his eyes seemed to grow larger, and his lips were framing the strange call which, she felt sure, would unloose that grim, familiar fluttering overhead to attack her eyes.

Then the unbearable tension was broken. A sharp rap echoed from the panels and the door was flung open.

"Mr. Davenant has called for Miss Mercer, sir!" announced a manservant, and Alison ran past him into the well-lit hall where Hugh was waiting. One last, frightened look she threw back into the gloomy library. Simeon Stroud still stood there, hand half-raised and sombre eyes smouldering in deep sockets, but of the owl that had fluttered above his head she could see no sign.

Next day Simeon Stroud received his £20,000 from old Tom Mercer's solicitor, and, from that time onwards, the folks of Horley saw him no more. From that time, too, Alison Mercer became a changed woman. All the care-free

happiness of girlhood returned to her, she had found love and she had no fear of taking between her two hands the best of all gifts the gods may bestow upon mortals. But summer had come and gone again before Hugh returned to Horley, to ask for her hand in marriage and to receive such a joyful assent as set his whole soul singing.

They were to be married just before Christmas, and Hugh had taken an old-fashioned, furnished house at Uleswood in the Lake District for their honeymoon. The place was in wild country, not far from Ullswater. There was a distinct similarity between the two names and it never occurred to Hugh that "ule" is the old English form for "owl"; and that "Uleswood" is, therefore, "Owlswood", otherwise he might have chosen another locality for their honeymoon. On the other hand, he might not have done so; for Stroud seemed to have vanished entirely from their lives, and it is doubtful if they ever gave a thought to him, until Alison received, among the last of many wedding-presents, four silver pepper-casters fashioned to represent owls. No card accompanied this gift, but she entertained no doubt as to whence it had come; and yet, for some reason, which she did not even attempt to explain to herself, she did not mention the matter to Hugh. Those four silver symbols filled her with a strange, vague dread, and perhaps she feared that mention to Hugh of her former fiancé might cast some shadow upon the magic wonder of their honeymoon.

The house at Uleswood proved to be a perfect little gem of steep-gabled roofs, leaded and mullioned windows and oak-panelled rooms. The night they arrived was one of gorgeous moonlight, the bedroom was hot and close with the resinous reek of the pine-logs blazing in the hearth, and Alison set the window wide open before she crept into bed.

Midnight was long past when a finger of moonlight stole softly across the floor, crept up the wall and travelled svelinely on until it rested upon two heads—one dark, the other golden—which lay so close to one another. Hugh stirred uneasily and murmured in his sleep.

*"Twhitt! Twhoo!"*

Hugh's sleepy eyes opened and he turned in search of that beauty of soul and body that the night had given entirely into his keeping.

*"Twhitt! Twhoo!"*

Faint and from far away the horned owl's cry came echoing.

Hugh's hand stretched out and touched the soft, warm curve of his bride's breast, that rose and fell so gently. The lovely warmth of living flesh comforted him, banished the vague fear which the owl's cry had aroused in his half-wakened fancy. A small hand sought for and encircled his fingers. His head sank back upon the pillow. Sleep was returning.

*"Twhitt! Twhoo!"*

Louder—and nearer now! Great evil eyes, luminous and eerie, glared in through the leaded panes. Wide wings were spread and a vast form floated silently towards the open casement. Hugh Davenant turned restlessly and shuddered in his sleep. The moon was gone, swallowed up by a bank of black-bellied clouds. The white mystery circled slowly above the wedded lovers slumbering in that soft, warm bed. Silence; abysmal darkness. Nothing save twin lamps of fear that floated through the gloom.

Hugh Davenant dreamed that he was back in a front-line trench in Flanders. And it was as it had been in the beginning. Once more the blind night rocked to the awful roar of big guns, once more the trench-lights soared, green and ghastly, towards the storm-dark skies; and yet, once more, the dreaded North-East gas wind came blowing out of the blackness across No Man's Land, with death enfolded beneath the silence of its wings—its wings silent as those of an owl.

*"Twhitt! Twhoo!"*

The claws of the gas clouds were searching for Davenant's windpipe, its wings descended upon his face, tearing and rending his flesh. A catch at the back of his throat—water for breath. Fight it off! Kill those bloody swine in the helmet!

who were following up the foul veils of death they had let loose.

Something was striking at his eyes now. God! If they should blind him. Then, at last, his hands closed upon living flesh. Something human to battle with—something that couldn't kill, as the poison-gas killed—a soft, human throat—the shrill whistle of life's breath crushed out by merciless hands. Dear God, if he could only see! See and exult at the sight of starting eyeballs, glimpse the black tongue protruding through snarling lips. Curse this gas-helmet that was blinding him.

He released his hands to snatch it off and felt his fingers sink into soft feathers, while something tore at his face with rending agony.

"Oh, Christ! Jesu Christ, save me!"

Weak and agonized, the pitiful prayer echoed in his ears, and he knew, as the mists of dream-madness cleared from his brain, that it was around her throat—his wife's throat—that his hands had been locked in the awful death-grip.

His hand stretched out towards the lamp beside the bed, but before his fingers could find the switch, something soft and feathery struck him in the face again, and again a hooked beak pecked savagely at his eyes.

"Oh! Jesu Christ, save us both from the Power of the Beast!"

Again that feeble, piteous cry for aid; and, as if in answer from overhead, a terrifying scream of baffled, evil rage:

"*Twhitt! Twhoop!!*"

Hugh's fumbling fingers found the switch, the room was flooded with light and he saw a great owl, as big as an eagle, it seemed, go circling round the room for the last time.

As it vanished through the window, Hugh, heedless of the blood streaming from his features, snatched up the revolver, which long habit overseas had accustomed him to placing always upon a table beside his bed, and sprang to the open casement. As he reached the window the moon sailed into sight and he saw the great owl flying fast and low above the ground, as it circled towards the house for a fresh attack.

The vastness of it seemed to fill all the space of night as it rushed upon him. But the man's nerves were steady as

chilled steel, as he fired again and again, aiming with deadly deliberation to send the heavy bullets smashing into the evil brain behind those luminously glowing eyes.

And then it was over. With a last wild shriek, the awful cry of some lost soul hurled down to face everlasting damnation, the great owl heeled over and fluttered slowly to the earth.

Alison crept shakily across the room, fingering her bruised throat with tender touch. She closed and barred the casement and turned to tend the man whose handsome features had been cut to ribbons by the cruel talons of the great bird.

. . . . .  
And in the morning, a gardener, coming early to his work, found beneath the window of the honeymooning couple the dead body of a man with strangely pointed ears and a fringe of soft hair encircling his features. The rest of his face was unidentifiable, for heavy bullets had smashed their way through between the eyes and the head was almost blown to pieces.

But to whom, save Simeon Stroud, could those pointed, hair-tipped ears and that strange fringe of feathery fluff about the chin have belonged?

## Four Doomed Men

GEOFFREY VACE

A SCREAM, rending the stillness of an India night, is not unusual. The scream which stopped Chowkander King on that mysterious by-street of Delhi, where a man is wise to move on, and mind his own business; that turned his face toward a forbidding-looking doorway, and sent his feet, a second later, flying up a narrow, winding staircase more forbidding than the doorway—that scream pulsed with mortal pain and terror.

At the top of the staircase, King stopped. The scream had passed. He waited an instant for it to be repeated, but there was no sound. Only an oppressive feeling that he was being watched; that, foolishly, he was walking into a net.

He turned to the door—and stopped. It was not the door at all. It did not move under his hand. The knob was fast; it was not made to turn. With a swift intake of breath, King turned completely around and faced the door again. He was doubly sure now that he was being peered at through some hidden opening. He laughed suddenly, deep in himself. Of course!—he had tried the wrong panel in the square hall. He looked about again. Cunningly-placed mirrors reflected each other, making it impossible at first glance to tell which were real and which were not.

King waited, his eyes becoming more accustomed to the half-light. After a moment of careful thought, he stepped forward and seized the handle of the right door. It yielded under his touch, and swung inward. A light curtain, swaying slowly under a faint breeze, brushed into his face. Without stopping he pushed it aside, and took five steps into a pitch-black room.

At the fifth step, King halted. He seemed to sense other beings in the room, whether behind him or before him he had no means of telling. His finger sought the butt of his

service revolver, and clutched it warmly. From far away came the sound of a door closing softly. A soft, green light suddenly broke the gloom. With the light came the unmistakable odour of musk.

King felt a slight movement at his side and turned his head. A door had appeared in the wall. A tall figure in the native dress of a Sikh leaned gracefully in the opening. His body was completely enveloped in a long, silken robe which swept the floor and revealed only a pair of turned-up, pointed shoes. His head was swathed in a great turban, at the side of which flashed the jewelled hilt of a small dagger.

"The sahib is perhaps in the wrong house?" he suggested meditatively. His eyes glowed, his voice was soft. He strode into the room with a dignity and grace that perhaps, some day, the West will master.

Chowkander King watched him closely. He was beginning to feel that perhaps he had been too hasty. Perhaps it would be wise to pretend that he *had* got the wrong house, and make a safe getaway. But something caused him to change his mind.

"I heard a scream," he said, watching the Sikh carefully, yet not appearing to. The robed figure raised a deprecating hand and a shoulder.

"Sahib—this is India. This is Delhi. Screams are not uncommon."

"This scream was most uncommon. It was the cry of a man who is being murdered, and knows it, yet cannot prevent it. I believe it was the cry of that man who lies behind that curtain."

"Sahib!" The Sikh was startled out of his calm. He stepped quickly to King's side. The faint smile of condescension had left his face. His eyes burned.

"Sahib, no man lies behind that curtain. You have made a mistake. The door is immediately behind you!"

King could still have withdrawn—but King seldom withdrew.

"No mistake has been made," he replied, not taking his eyes from the Sikh's for an instant now, "unless you have made it. I rather think you have. You neglected to make sure that the man's feet were as carefully concealed as his dead body!"

The Sikh moved quickly—but Chowkander King was quicker. His revolver came level with the man's eyes.

"Too late now, my friend. You can see the tell-tale foot from here. Walk slowly, and pull back that curtain. Then stand behind the body. And, remember, I could shoot you with ease, and I should not hesitate for one moment to do so."

The Sikh bowed low, folding his arms across his chest.

"The sahib errs," he said with dignity. "But, having no choice, I shall do as the sahib says."

He turned his back on King's levelled weapon, and strode slowly to the portière. With a swish of his arm, he threw it aside, and stood behind it.

"Who is that man?" King said, sharply. The figure lay half on its side, half on its back. Its long arms were flung wide, its slant eyes closed. The silk robe, three-coloured, which covered it, could belong only to an Oriental of high caste.

The Sikh raised his head a trifle, sending scintillating lights from the jewels of his dagger.

"I could tell the sahib who the Chinaman is; yet, once again, I make the suggestion that the sahib is in the wrong house. Perhaps it was the house next door that the sahib wished?"

"Perhaps it was," King replied. "Then, again, perhaps it wasn't. Answer my question!"

The Sikh shrugged again.

"I do not know the man's name, sahib. I have forgotten it."

"Then you shall come with me to the police. I understand they have ways of their own of refreshing the memories of men who have a convenient habit of forgetting. Who killed the man?"

King did not expect a direct reply from the Sikh, but the answer he got was hardly the evasion he anticipated.

"I could not be sure, sahib. It was one of three men."

King eyed the man steadily for a full minute without speaking. Then: "He has been dead perhaps five minutes—not more than ten. You are alone in this house. Yet one of three men killed him. Are you one of those three?"

"But no, sahib. I had no hand in the murder of this unfortunate Oriental. It is no affair of mine."

King kept his temper. Years of service with the British Indian Intelligence had taught him the wisdom of that trick. He smiled slightly, intending to disarm the Sikh.

"Perhaps you would be so kind as to tell me how this man came to be stabbed in your house?"

The smile had the intended effect. The Sikh bowed again. He raised his silken arm and pointed to a long table in the middle of the room.

"I had visitors to-night, sahib. Four men—I do not remember their names. I was showing the gentlemen a stone—a pigeon's-blood ruby from Burma. It is pure, sahib, and precious. It rested on the table in that case you see there. Of a sudden the lights were put out mysteriously. It was minutes before I could get them on again. And the ruby was gone. One of my gentlemen had stolen it. There could be no other conclusion. I moved them to shame. I scorned them, and told them that I would put out the lights again, and when they were again put on, I should expect to find my stone in its case on the table. It was dark—there was the sudden sound of a scuffle; a scream, sahib. I had the lights on in an instant—"

"Yes?"

"The stone was still gone, sahib. And this man—was stabbed."

King watched the man closely. His revolver never wavered from its target. No man yet had caught Chowkander King asleep.

"And the other three men vanished into smoke, I take it?" he said sarcastically.

The Sikh was not the least offended by King's tone. He merely smiled and stretched his hand again.

"The sahib was not quiet coming up the stairs. The hall of the mirrors confused him, as was intended. Meantime, the three left by other ways. There are ways—and ways—out of this house, sahib!"

King nodded.

"Your story may be the truth," he said shortly. "Nevertheless, you shall come with me. You have refused me your

name. That is enough for me—and the police. Come along!"

The Sikh brushed past the curtain, and passed in front of King without a word. He walked straight to the door which led into the deceptive hall, and opened it. King glanced at the body of the murdered Chinaman—and what followed was too sudden for the eye to register.

With a swiftness, beside which the recoil of a snake is sluggish, the Sikh snatched the jewelled dagger from his turban and leaped at King. The muzzle of King's revolver came round in an instant, but to have shot would have brought half of Delhi clamouring at the door—and that was something King wished to avoid; he was on the track of something that certainly was not the business of half of Delhi.

He darted back, raising his arm and taking the knife-slash across his sleeve. He seemed to lose his balance and fall to the floor. The Sikh laughed triumphantly, and his knife flashed up again. But if the Sikh was fast—King was lightning. His left hand clenched at the floor and swung up in a wide arc. The arc ended abruptly at the point of the Sikh's black beard. Without a sound, the great form slipped down and lay motionless.

King stood over him, staring at the closed eyes and heavy beard. He fingered the tear on his own sleeve where the knife had struck him, dusted imaginary dust from both sleeves; then dug into the pocket of his tunic and produced a small notebook and pencil.

King was a methodical man; he never wasted a moment. Nor did he ever change his direction. He had decided to take the tall Sikh to police officials and hold him in connection with the death of the Chinaman in the fine, silk robe. The fact that the Sikh lay unconscious on the floor caused no change in King's plans. It simply meant that they would be delayed. There would be time to kill. And King went about it in his usual manner.

His pencil scrawled over the page of his notebook. He wrote a few lines, then stopped to read them.

"Moy Dong," he read, "the Chinaman of the High Dynasty, who has been spending so much time among the Sikh troops—is dead. He was killed in the house of Rahman

Singh, the Sikh, who has also been seen too often at the native barracks. Was Moy Dong killed by Rahman Singh?"

King read the note twice, and shook his head. He looked again at the form on the floor at his feet. No—he did not believe that the Sikh had actually wielded the knife. But—

With the "but" King stopped and touched the Sikh with the toe of his boot. The big native groaned and raised his head.

"As soon as you can walk," King said slowly, "we will go to the police office."

It was ten minutes later before the man was sufficiently revived to get to his feet. He walked unsteadily to the hall, King's revolver pressed to his back.

They passed down the stairs thus. In the street hardly a man was visible. Delhi had long since gone to sleep.

"Walk straight, and remember, just because I didn't shoot you down like a dog the first time, doesn't mean that I would hesitate a second," King said softly. The Sikh nodded, but did not speak. A slight smile curved his mouth—a smile that King could not see.

If King had thought that police headquarters of Delhi would welcome him, he was disappointed. The native officer in charge refused to accept the complaint of murder against the tall Sikh. He simply opened his mouth and goggled at the thought. He cowered when King threatened, but it was no use. He insisted upon calling the captain from his bed. King argued and cajoled. He simply wanted the Sikh held until morning—but he finally gave in. Captain Kirby was awakened and summoned.

He appeared in the room ten minutes later, still apparently drugged with sleep, outwardly cursing all men who disturbed his night's rest.

"By Gad, King!" he exploded, when he caught sight of the Secret Service man. There was no love wasted between the police and the Secret Service. "If I'd known it was one of you bally interferers, I damn well should have told you to go to the devil! Can't you chaps ever mind your own business? I've been four solid hours getting to sleep,

only to be pulled from my bed to be told that some poor chap has been clouting his wife; or has war been declared, and you're going back to England to-morrow? Gad! I hope it's the latter!"

King brought his gaze down from the ceiling, and allowed his heels to drop back to the floor. He seemed to be controlling his patience with an effort.

"Now, if you're all done, Kirby, let me tell you why I did come," King said quietly. "I have unearthed a nice little murder case. The suspect is in the next room. Your lunkhead assistant refused to take him into custody."

Kirby snorted.

"A murderer! A mere murderer! India's full of 'em, King. And the less we have to do with them, the better off we are. That is, unless the murderer was a white man. Then —things are different. Let's have a look at him, anyway. I'm awake now—and I probably won't get to sleep again for another four hours, so I might as well make the most of it."

Still fuming Kirby threw open the door of the adjoining room. He stood for a moment on the sill. King could not see his face, but he heard an almost inaudible gasp. And as he heard the gasp, he saw something else that nearly made him repeat the gesture of the police captain. He stared long at Kirby's feet, and then passed through the door behind the captain.

The Sikh stood motionless. Kirby turned hurriedly to King.

"Is this the prisoner?" he cried excitedly.

King nodded, not taking his eyes from the Sikh's face.

"This is the man suspected of murder, Kirby."

Kirby groaned. His shoulders seemed to loosen, allowing his gaunt frame to sag.

"Good God!" he said breathlessly. "What mare's-nests you S. S. chaps do dig up! Take this man out, and send him home. Apologize to him! Anything—only don't anger him."

"This man is accused of murder, Kirby. It makes no difference to me if he's the god Shiva himself, I intend to

prefer a charge against him, and investigate a neat little plot. Don't be a fool, Kirby."

Kirby groaned again.

"Fool? I, a fool, King? No!—you're the only fool here. You have arrested a man who practically controls the Sikh movement in Delhi. With a turn of his hand he could cause every loyal Sikh regiment to mutiny, and shout for Germany! Loose him, I say, for heaven's sake!"

King turned to where the Sikh was watching the white men argue about him. They were not speaking his tongue, but he understood—and he still smiled.

"For some unknown reason, you were right," King said to him. "I made a mistake. I got the wrong house. That scream I heard was a myth, and you couldn't possibly have killed that man who is dead in your house. Go!"

The Sikh smiled until his teeth gleamed. He looked straight at the eyes of Captain Kirby, and turned to the door. In an instant the night had swallowed him up.

"You chaps are always getting our necks into a sling——"

But Kirby was talking to himself. King, too, had gone.

King walked slowly down the narrow street. Two things bothered him. One was the fact that the Sikh and Kirby had had a mutual understanding. The second was that Kirby had lied about having been in bed for four hours; for beneath the bottoms of Kirby's pyjama-legs, King had plainly seen the ends of a pair of regulation leather leggings. Captain Kirby would be most unlikely to go to bed for four hours and forget to remove his leggings.

King did a dangerous thing—dangerous because he was undoubtedly a marked man. He had caused the arrest of a Sikh of importance; he had angered the police captain, for some reason which he was racking his brain to find out. As for the dangerous thing that King did—he stopped under a lamp in a small street, and, heedless of the target he made for unfriendly bullets, he pulled out his notebook.

"Kirby mentioned twice that he had been in bed for four hours," he wrote. "Yet he had not taken off his leggings. Moreover, he was stunned at the sight of the Sikh. Could it be possible that Kirby was one of *the four*?"

Having made the note, King ripped the page out and made tiny fragments of it. On the next new page he made another note:

"Kirby of the police was one of the four who saw Rahman Singh's ruby."

The doubt had left him suddenly. Then King ran true to form. He had been warned to leave the Sikh alone. But if a man reputed to control the wills of the thousands of Sikh troops had for some reason killed another man—and if the trusted captain of Delhi's police was in the plot—that certainly was the business of the Secret Service.

So, contrary to the wishes of Captain Kirby, and contrary to his own good judgment, Chowkander King once more climbed the mysterious staircase, and found himself in the hall of mirrors. This time, he made no mistake about the door. Nor did he care whether the tall Sikh was before him or behind him. He entered the murder room with his gun in his hand and his eyes wide open.

He walked straight to the shimmering curtain—and then stopped. The body had gone.

"Sahib!"

The voice startled King into turning more quickly than he had intended to. A babu—a native Hindoo of considerable learning, naked but for a loin-cloth and cloak—confronted him.

"Well?" King snapped, assuming anger to hide his surprise.

"Take warning, sahib, from a person whose name I shall not mention. Go no farther into the death of Moy Dong. He was a marked man. The sahib would be wise to heed the warning."

King would have answered, but the fat babu waddled out of hearing through an unexpected door.

King swore softly and followed the babu. A few steps took him down a small corridor which turned sharply to the right. There were no entering doors; the babu must have come this way—and King wanted to talk earnestly with that half-naked man of learning.

At the foot of a flight of stairs, he stopped. There were three doors, all of them closed. King's eyes fastened on the

middle one. It seemed to him that that one had just shut the instant he got there.

There was no light inside at all; only pitch blackness, and the uncanny feeling that he was not alone—that he was being watched. He walked slowly across the floor. His foot suddenly collided with something soft. In a second he had reached down and felt it, and pulled his hand back with a shudder.

At least, he had discovered the body of Moy Dong. He would have a chance to examine it. With a package of matches in his hand he knelt to the floor. The first flame flared up and smoked out. But in the second of light, King had seen something that made the hair prickle at the nape of his neck.

The body was not Moy Dong's; not a Chinaman, but a Hindoo priest, wrapped in his filthy, white robe. And in the Hindoo's clenched fist was a small dagger—the same that had protruded from the shoulders of Moy Dong on the floor above. King had to light a second match to make sure of the brown stain on the blade of the knife.

Once King was sure of that stain, and knew it to be the blood of a man not long dead—knew it almost certainly to be the blood of Moy Dong—he turned the body of the Hindoo over and held up another match.

There was no doubt as to the way the priest had met his death. The blue mouth and goggling eyes shouted their tale of strangulation, and King gave his attention to the man's throat. He was surprised to find no mark—but then he turned the body back again, and discovered the two deep thumb-marks at the back of the neck, and he immediately visualized an enormous pair of hands—a pair of hands that King had seen not long ago. If he could have seen to write, he would have pulled out his notebook and made an entry. That entry would have read:

"Found a Hindoo priest—undoubtedly Krishna, the man interested in the Sikh movement for freedom. He was killed by severe pressure applied to the base of his skull. His hand kept hold of a bloody knife, even in death. Did he kill Moy Dong? If he did—who killed *him*?"

Since it was impossible for King to see to write without

holding the match, and impossible for him to hold the match and write at the same time, he merely thought the entry, and made his way from the room as swiftly as he could move.

He couldn't tell where he was going, but the general direction was down—and away from that awful room. He went along another passage, and up a flight of steps. At least he was out of the cellars, and on the level of the street.

The faint odour of perfume came to him again, and he followed it; back to the room where he had first encountered Rahman Singh.

"Sahib!"

King stopped, listening. It was the same voice undoubtedly. The voice of the fat babu. King listened.

"Heed that warning, sahib. Go no farther into the death of Moy Dong, the Chinese. Let the death of Krishna, the Hindoo, remain a mystery. Go, sahib, while you are safe. The sahib will not be warned again!"

King toyed with the butt of his revolver. He still had the feeling that he was being watched from behind—yet the babu was most certainly behind the curtain in front of him. He waited. Then:

"Babu, there are two men dead—murdered—in this house. Both those men were interested in the movement to free the Sikhs. Who killed those men?"

"Sahib—"

King whirled about. The voice had spoken at his elbow. The tall Sikh had come up noiselessly behind him. That explained his uncanny feeling of being watched. Rahman Singh folded his arms across his chest, and lowered his head until the great black beard rested on his silk robe.

King watched him, and watched the curtain from behind which the babu had spoken. It no longer swayed. The babu seemed to have gone.

"The babu is right," Rahman Singh said, in a deep voice. "Leave the house, sahib. Heed the warning of Kirby sahib at the police office. The sahib is playing with fire; fire of white heat."

King smiled grimly. He swung his revolver loosely by the guard. He noticed that Rahman Singh's eyes seldom left

the weapon. He noticed, too, that the dagger of the Sikh's turban had gone.

"Two men are dead in this house, my friend. I have seen both bodies, thanks to the babu. One, a Chinaman high in the Dynasty; the other a Hindoo priest. The first was stabbed. The knife which stabbed the first was in the hand of the second. The second was killed by breaking his neck——"

"The door is once more opened for the sahib. Do not come back!"

The smile had gone from Rahman Singh's eyes; his last words were as the crack of a whip. King did not move. Their eyes clashed like crossed rapiers, feeling out the strength behind them.

A minute passed, only their breathing breaking the stillness.

"Rahman Singh," King said softly, a peculiar gleam of triumph in his eyes, "there were four men at the table, looking at the Burma Ruby. How many of those four are still alive?"

Only Rahman's Singh's lips moved. The curtain seemed to sway. It might have been King's imagination, but he was ready for attack from any side. He remembered plainly the speed with which that jewelled dagger could be whisked from the Sikh's turban.

"Two!"

The Sikh spat the word, then slowly raised his arm and pointed to the door.

"Go—sahib!"

King grinned.

"All right, my friend," he said slowly. "I am not quite right; and I am not far wrong. Salaam, sahib!" With a mock bow, King closed the door behind him and ran down the steps to the street.

If King were asked where he walked in the next hour he would be unable to tell. He traversed most of the narrow streets of Delhi. He went through every passage of his mind in an effort to link the murders of two men interested in a rebellion of the Sikh cavalry, by a third man interested in the same thing. But he was practically certain that the third

man did not murder the first two! Besides, there was the police captain who wore his leggings to bed. He—

Chowkander King stopped his walk abruptly, and turned on his heel. He snapped his finger in a gesture of disgust—disgust at his own stupidity—and went charging full speed along the small street in the direction of the police office.

As he rounded the last corner he put on an additional burst of speed. There was a crowd of curiosity-mad natives packed thickly about the door. King pushed through, sweating, impatient. A gaunt arm seized his shoulder. He looked into a pair of hard, grey eyes above a sandy beard. Commander Carron had evidently dressed in a hurry; his tunic was unbuttoned half down the front.

"King! Thank God, you've come! We've been looking over half Delhi for you. There's the devil's own mess here. Come inside—"

King interrupted him, striding past into the room.

"How was he killed?"

"Killed? How—?"

"Kirby—how was Kirby killed, Carron? Knifed—or strangled? Don't stand there gawking, Carron! For heaven's sake, speak up. You've been searching half Delhi for me; I'm here. Tell me what I want to know."

Carron told him.

"Poisoned, King. Bite of a tarantula. Got it in a box in the next room. But how the devil you knew—"

"I didn't know, Carron. I guessed—when I was half a mile away in Chadni Chowk. I ran into a little play-acting to-night. Four men viewed a particularly famous Burma Ruby, in the house of Rahman Singh, the chap who has been influencing the Sikh troops against British rule. Two of those four men are dead. I took Rahman Singh into custody, and Kirby refused to book him; told me I was crazy to play with the man who held the destinies of the Sikhs in the palm of his hand. And Kirby pretended that I had got him out of bed, where he had been four hours getting to sleep. But I noticed that he had his leggings on under his pyjamas. Fool that I was, I have only just ten minutes ago realized why Kirby had his leggings on! How do you know it was the tarantula?"

Carron had regained some of his dignity.

"No doubt of it, King. The guard heard a sort of thump, and pushed open the door of Kirby's room. Kirby was lying on the floor, with the great hairy spider on his cheek. It must have bitten him while he was asleep, and the poison worked slowly. We have caught the man who did it, so there is no mystery there. The fellow evidently had the spider, and wanted to put Kirby out of the way. He simply went into Kirby's room when Kirby was asleep and loosed the insect. He waited a little too long——"

"Who was it?" King snapped the words.

Carron smiled a smile of satisfaction. At least there was one thing King didn't know!

"A babu——"

"A fat babu? Nearly naked? Waddles when he walks?"

The smile went from Carron's face again. He nodded.

"He's in the guard-room. Know him?"

"Of course. He's the fourth man who saw the Burma Ruby at Rahman Singh's."

"The fourth! Who the devil were the other three?"

King extended three fingers of his right hand and took hold of the first.

"One—the first—was Moy Dong, the Chinaman. The second was Krishna, the Hindoo priest. The third—was Kirby! The fourth, the babu. The only thing I don't quite understand is how Rahman Singh fits into the picture. Also, where is the Burma Ruby? Get the babu. Bring him to this room and leave him here with me. I have a few questions I want to ask him; then you can do what you like with him. Get him up here right away."

Carron went to the door and gave an order. A minute later, the half-naked babu came in. At sight of King, he shrank back, a look of genuine fear on his oily face.

"Sahib—I know nothing, nothing at all. I only came with a message—a message from Rahman Singh to Kirby sahib—and Kirby sahib was dead. I know nothing, sahib!"

"Sit down, babu," King said sharply. The babu slumped heavily into a straight-backed chair, and King turned to Carron.

"He won't talk if you're here, Carron. Go out; see those curtains over there?" King whispered now, and indicated the swinging portières with a nod of his head. "Go through the next room, and get behind those curtains from the other side. Listen—but don't move. Don't even breathe if it makes a noise! And don't come out under any circumstances until I call you. Plain?"

Carron understood. He went through the door without even glancing at the babu.

"Now," King started, drawing a chair to the table. "*Babuji*, the time when you know nothing is past. This is the time when you know something; just how much you know, I'm going to find out."

A faint rustle of silk told King that Carron was in his place.

"Sahib, I know nothing!"

"What was the message you brought from Rahman Singh to Kirby? Hand it over to me!"

"I have lost it, sahib. I do not know where it is!"

King rapped sharply on the table. The door opened; a tall Sikh guard stood at salute.

"Guard! Take this man out. Have that filthy loin-cloth stripped from him. I'm looking for a message to Kirby. Turn him inside out!"

The big Sikh grinned; he hated babus. In two strides he was at the naked man's side. The babu shrank back. The thought of losing his loin-cloth appalled him.

"Nay, sahib!" he wailed. "There wasn't any message. Do not let him touch me. Do not! There wasn't any message!"

King nodded, his lips compressed in a thin line.

"I thought as much. You came here to put the spider in Kirby's room; not to deliver a message for Rahman Singh at all?"

The babu squirmed, and held out his hands, palms up to the ceiling.

"No, sahib! I did not come to put the spider in the room of Kirby sahib. I came to deliver a message for Rahman Singh."

"You just said there wasn't any message."

"There wasn't, sahib. None that I could hand over to

you. It was what you call by word of mouth. A verbal message."

"Then what was it?" King demanded. "Repeat it!"

"That I cannot do, sahib. So much has happened since that I cannot even remember the first word of it. I swear it, sahib!"

King leaned forward, and thrust a finger under the babu's nose.

"If there was a message, babu, repeat it. If there was no message, you came here to murder Kirby, as you murdered Moy Dong, the Chinaman, and as you murdered Krishna, the Hindoo. What was that message that Rahman Singh sent to Captain Kirby? Answer me!"

"Sahib! You are mistaken; I did not murder Moy Dong. The death of Krishna was unfortunate, but I did not kill him. The sahib—"

*"What was that message?"*

The babu looked into King's eyes, and his red face blanched.

"Only this, sahib," he said, looking at the floor. "Rahman Singh wished me to say to Kirby sahib—'If you have it, give it up. It is not worth the price you will have to pay'. That was the message."

"And did Kirby give it up when you came for it?" King asked quickly.

"But no, sahib. He—"

The babu stopped abruptly. His face was the colour of chalk. He gripped the table-edge, and watched the grin of triumph spread over King's face.

"Ah!" King said softly. "Kirby refused to give it up. So you simply loosed the spider—waited until the deadly poison had taken its effect on him—then took it from him! And since you couldn't find it at once, you had no opportunity to make a getaway. If you found what you were looking for, it is on you now—or else it is in Kirby's room. Guard!"

The big Sikh was still near the door.

"Rip that rag from his carcass. Whatever he took from Kirby will be there, unless he's swallowed it!"

"No-no-no-no-sahib!" The babu seemed to shrivel into a

mere mass of flesh. "I will tell everything—everything. Only send away the other sahib. I will tell you alone. I promise!"

King signalled the guard to leave the room, and waited until he had closed the door behind him. He glanced at the swaying curtain, and it was with some satisfaction that he realized Carron was still there.

"Now, *babuji*—everything! Starting with the death of Moy Dong, and ending with the death of Kirby."

"I know nothing of the death of Moy Dong——"

"Starting with the death of Moy Dong," King repeated, paying no attention to the babu's words. "At the time of the showing of the Burma Ruby at Rahman Singh's house, there were four men present, besides the Sikh himself. The stone was on the table in a case. The lights went out. What happened next?"

The babu shook his round head.

"I do not know, sahib. It was so long ago; my memory on such things is poor. I cannot remember——"

"See if you can remember this." King's finger went under the babu's nose again. "You'll tell all you know, and tell it quickly, or you'll go to the scaffold for the death of Captain Kirby. I'll give you just one minute to tell what took place the instant the lights were turned out. One minute!"

The babu held his stomach, and shook with fright, either real or assumed.

"I'll tell, sahib—everything—immediately. But I must have water. My throat is parched."

King called for drinks. The guard came in with two glasses of native wine, and placed them on the table. King watched the babu carefully, and thought he saw just the slightest sign of triumph on the fat face.

"What happened, babu?" he repeated, when the native had sipped his wine and replaced his glass on the table.

"There was a slight movement near me, sahib. When the lights went on again, the ruby was gone. Rahman Singh was angry. He had the lights darkened again, in order that the thief should replace the jewel. This time there was a scuffle. There was the blow of a knife—a scream—and the sahib's footbeats on the stairs. There are many ways from Rahman

Singh's house. The others escaped, leaving the Chinaman on the floor."

The babu stopped, and sipped his wine. King stared straight at the swaying curtain, and thought.

"Moy Dong was killed by one of four men. Which one, babu?"

"That I do not know, sahib. The lights were out. It was pitch-black. I sensed only the movement at my side."

King stood up. He walked around the babu's back and past the curtain to the door. As he passed the hangings, he mouthed the words: "Don't move!" At the door, he whispered into the ear of the Sikh guard, then walked slowly back to his seat.

Behind the curtain, Carron's heart beat faster. He had seen something King had not seen. The instant King's back had turned, the native had snatched a tiny phial from his belt, and emptied it into King's glass. In a moment, he had replaced the tube, and resumed his expression of innocence and ignorance.

"Now," King went on, as though there had been no interruption, "one of those five took the ruby. Moy Dong took it first from the table. He was killed—"

The explosion of a rifle just outside the door stopped him. The babu jumped, swung around, half got up, then slumped back.

King was lighting a cigarette.

"It's nothing," he said evenly. "The guard ordered the crowd from the door, and shot over their heads to frighten them. I was saying—Moy Dong must have taken the ruby from the table. Whoever knifed him wanted the stone. Who wanted the stone? Or rather, babu, who *didn't* want the stone?"

King picked up his glass. The eyes of the babu grew wide. He watched every movement of King's hand from the table to his mouth. He watched King drink, with only a slight stiffening of his muscles. He sat back and waited.

"Who didn't want the ruby, babu? Who—didn't—want—babu! You—killer!"

King's voice trailed away. His eyes were opened, but only a trifle. His chest heaved; he seemed to stop breathing, and

his head fell on to his breast. The babu got up, and stood leaning on the table edge, grinning maliciously.

"Ah—the sahib was so clever! So utterly clever! But he forgot that others were clever, too. Moy Dong *did* take the Burma Ruby. He *was* killed for it. Krishna killed him, with one blow of his knife. He ran to the cellars in an effort to escape, but Kirby sahib was too quick for him. With a twist of his powerful hands he broke the Hindoo's neck! Broke it, sahib!"

The babu seemed to grow taller. He had lost his hesitating manner of speech. The uncertainty of words had gone. His voice boomed a deep bass. King's head had sagged. Only the table leg kept him from sliding to the floor.

"That was two, sahib. But there was the other. Krishna—who was trying to make himself an independent ruler; Moy Dong, who would have made the Sikhs many promises on behalf of his Chinese ruler; Kirby, a traitor to his country. He wanted gold only. He was a puppet; they were all puppets. But they all interfered with my plans. And my plans, sahib, were the biggest of all. I will tell you; in the event of this world war we hear about, the great cavalry troops would have rebelled, and fought for Germany! For Germany, sahib. I could not fail!"

The babu stopped. He seemed to be out of breath. King never moved. The babu might have been talking to an empty room. He went on. His eyes gleamed; his voice grew softer.

"Look at me, sahib. But you can't! No matter. Think of me—think of me with this filthy grease washed from my body; with shoes whose soles are four inches thick, to give me height; with my head swathed in fifty yards of finest silks; with my body draped in a flowing robe, and my face hidden behind a black beard! Think, sahib. I will tell you, for you will never use the knowledge. I am Rahman Singh, the Sikh! As the Sikh, I played upon the sympathies of the regiments. As Rahman Singh, I invited my enemies—my greedy enemies—to my house. I showed them a piece of worthless red glass—worthless, sahib—gave them a chance to steal it, and stood back while they threw aside everything for greed; watched them kill each other for possession of what was not worth the life of an infidel!"

"The clever sahib! You were warned—twice warned. You thought you could match wits with Rahman Singh. You had the wine brought in, and drank it. Be careful, sahib, in this land where the art of poisoning is as old as the god of death himself. Never drink with an enemy—unless he be a dead one, or nearly dead. To you, sahib, who will be dead in a few minutes from poison—to you, I shall drink. To you—and to Germany's success!"

The babu—still the babu in looks, with his fat stomach and rounded face—but with the carriage and bearing of the tall Sikh, picked his glass from the table and balanced it neatly in his hand. He threw back his head, with a deep laugh.

"To the careless sahib!" he said, and drained the glass.

For an instant, he stood as still as a stone image. His eyes looked straight ahead; the eyes of a man suddenly gone blind. The smile faded from his round face. His head jerked back; the glass clattered to the floor.

Rahman Singh tried to shout, but the words stuck in his throat. With a quick rush, the poison seized him. He fell across the table, his head not a foot from King's face.

"You—devil!" he gasped, and quivered.

Chowkander King got up, and rubbed his arms.

"Never drink with an enemy unless you are sure he is dead, Rahman Singh," he said slowly. Then:

"All right, Carron. Come out!"

The curtain parted. The commander's face glistened with sweat. He walked across the room unsteadily.

"Good God, King! What an ordeal! If I hadn't *seen* you go to the door, and tell the sentry to shoot his gun—if I hadn't *seen* you switch the glasses when the babu turned around to see what was happening—if it hadn't been for those two things, King, I should have thought you were a goner sure, and I should have put a bullet right through that greasy head. How the devil did you know he had poisoned the wine? You were over at the door when he dropped the stuff from his phial."

King stooped and picked the glass from the floor, sniffed it and put it down.

"There is only one person in the world who likes water

less than an Indian babu of this one's class; and that is an Indian fakir who thinks it most unholy to touch the stuff. When a pure, unadulterated babu asks you for a glass of water—watch out. I was only guessing—and guessing wildly. But my suspicion was that he wanted it for that particular purpose. Then, he was terrified every time I threatened to have him searched. He had something he was deathly afraid to let us find on him. You will find, when you investigate, that Kirby was killed with the same poison. The scent of almonds was strong in his room, and that meant—prussic acid. The spider was merely to make it look natural. The bite of the tarantula would have made him deathly sick, and killed him slowly. Death from prussic acid in its native state is nearly instantaneous."

Carron made no reply. He watched Chowkander King lift Rahman Singh's lifeless form from the table, and place it gently on the floor. Then he said:

"For a moment, I nearly rushed out and spoiled your party, King. When your eyes began to stick out, and you got blue in the face, I had my gun pointing right at his chest."

King grinned, and fingered his throat tenderly.

"Don't think for a minute, Carron," he said seriously, "that any half-baked imitation of a man dying would have gone over with an arch-fiend like Rahman Singh—a man who would so cunningly get rid of his competitors by showing them a worthless ruby, telling them a fabulous tale of its value—and then standing by to watch them kill one another for the possession of it. I held my breath until I nearly choked. I'm afraid I was nearly as dead as Rahman Singh thought I was!"



# The Curse of the House of Phipps

SEABURY QUINN

JULES DE GRANDIN drew a final long puff from his cigarette, ground the fire from its glowing butt out against the bottom of the cloisonné ash-tray and emitted a tapering cone of grey smoke from his pursed lips, regarding the young man seated across the study desk with thoughtfully narrowed eyes. "And your *gran'père*, likewise, Monsieur?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," the visitor returned, a slight flush darkening his tanned cheeks, "and my great-great-grandfather, and his father, too. Not a man of my branch of the family since old Joshua Phipps has lived to see his children. Joshua fell dead across the threshold of his wife's room ten minutes after she became a mother. Eliab Phipps, the son Joshua never saw, died in the last assault on Cornwallis's works at Yorktown. News travelled slowly in those days, but when the men of his command came back to Massachusetts they told his widow the details of their captain's death. All agreed he was shot through the lungs a little after ten in the morning. Half an hour earlier the same day his wife had given birth to a son. That son died at Buena Vista the same day *his* son was born back in Woolwich, Massachusetts, and that son, my grandfather, was shot in the draft riots in New York during the Civil War. His twin children, a son and daughter, were born the same night.

"I was born December 26, thirty years ago. The doctor sent my father post-haste to the drug store for some forgotten medicines, and as he returned from the errand a brick flew from a chimney, striking him on the head and killing him instantly. His wife became mother and widow almost at the same moment."

The young man paused with a short, hard laugh. "Call it superstition, coincidence—anything you like," he went on challengingly, "but it's got to be an obsession with me. I

can't shake the thought of it. It's driving me almost to frenzy, sir."

"*Parfaitemment,*" the little Frenchman agreed with a nod. "You are *nerveux*; the remembrance of all these so remarkable deaths has bored into your inner thought like a maggot in a cheese. You are—how do you say it in American? *Sans bouc*—goatless?"

"Exactly," the other smiled wanly. "I'm just about shot to pieces with the thought of it. If it were something I could sink my hands in—something tangible I could shoot or stick a bayonet into—I'd stand up to it and say, 'You be damned!' but it's not. All the men of my family, except old Joshua, perhaps, seem to have been pretty good fellows, as far as I can make out. They fought their country's battles; they paid their debts; they were good to their wives, but—there it is. The birth of a child is the death warrant of every Phipps descended from Joshua of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and I don't mind admitting I'm frightened of this thing, whatever it is. I've been more than ordinarily successful in my work—I'm an architect, you know—and I've several good commissions to execute right now, but I just can't seem to get my mind working on 'em. I've as much to live for as most men—work, achievement, possibly a woman's love and children of my own, some day; but there's this constant threat eating into me like a canker-worm, walking at my elbow, lying down to sleep with me and rising with me in the morning. I can't shake it any more than I could shake my skin, though I've done everything possible. It hangs on like Sindbad's Old Man of the Sea. I've consulted half a dozen of these so-called occultists, even went to a clairvoyant and a couple of mediums. Did they help? Like hell they did! They all say: 'Fear not, the evil from without cannot prevail against the good that lies within you; cultivate inward tranquillity and seek the light of truth and be of good cheer,' or some sort of fiddle-faddle like that. I'm not after fairy-tale comfort, Dr. de Grandin; I want some assurance of safety, if it's to be had.

"Once I tried a psycho-analyst. He wasn't much better than the other quacks. Talked a lot of learned tosh about relative subconsciousness, fear-complexes and inhibitions, then

assured me it was all in my mind—but you can damned well bet he couldn't explain why all my male ancestors died the instant they became fathers, and he didn't attempt to. Now"—the visitor straightened and looked almost challengingly into de Grandin's thoughtful eyes—"they tell me you're a scientist with an open mind. You don't slop over about the spirits of the departed, and you don't pooh-pooh any intimation of the supernatural. The mediums and occultists I've been to were a lot of ignorant charlatans. The psycho-analyst couldn't seem to grasp the idea that there's something more than the merely natural behind all this—he waved aside everything which couldn't be recorded on one of his instruments or which hadn't been catalogued by Freud. That's why I've come to you. I believe you can help me, if anyone can; if you can't do something for me, God have mercy. That's all there is to hope for if you fail, and it hasn't seemed to do much for the others."

"*Grand merci,*" the little Frenchman murmured almost ironically. "I greatly appreciate both your confidence and your frankness, Monsieur. Also, I concur in your pious wish that you may have the assistance of Deity. It may be true that Heaven's mercy did little or nothing for your ancestors, but then, in the olden days, Providence was not assisted by Jules de Grandin. To-day it is different. Suppose, now, we commence at the commencement, if you please. You have, perhaps, some intimation concerning the untimely taking-off of your forbears? You have heard some possible reason why your so distinguished ancestor, Monsieur Joshua, found Death's grinning countenance where he thought to look upon the features of his first-born?"

"Yes!" young Phipps answered tersely, the flush mounting to his face again. "You'll probably call it a lot o' nonsense, but I'm convinced it's—it's a family curse!"

"U'm?" De Grandin thoughtfully selected a long, black cigar from the humidor, bit its end and struck a match. "You interest me, Monsieur. Tell me more. Who cursed your family, and why was it done, if you know?"

"Here," Phipps drew a small, brown-leather volume from the inner pocket of his jacket and thrust it into the Frenchman's hand, "you'll find the history of it there. Obediah

Phipps, Joshua's younger brother, wrote it in his diary, 'way back in 1755. Start reading there; I've checked the salient entries in red," he indicated a dog-eared page of ancient, porous paper closely barred with fine writing in time-faded ink. "Obediah's comments may seem melodramatic, read in the cold light of the twentieth century," he added half-apologetically, "but when we remember how Joshua fell strangled with blood at the entrance of his wife's chamber, and how his son and his son's sons died to a man without seeing their children, it doesn't seem so overdrawn, after all. Something else: every man-jack of 'em died in such a way that his mouth was smeared with blood. Oh, the old curse has been carried out, letter for letter, whether by coincidence or not!"

"U'm?" de Grandin repeated non-committally, taking the slender booklet in his hand and examining its binding curiously.

It was a cap octavo volume, bound in beautifully tanned brown leather carved and embossed with scrolls, *œils-de-bœuf*, and similar ornaments dear to the heart of eighteenth century bookbinders. Across the back was stamped in gold:

*OBEDIAH PHIPPS  
HIS JOURNAL*

"Trowbridge, my friend," de Grandin ruffled quickly through the book's yellowed leaves, then passed it to me, "do you have the kindness to read to us that which this Monsieur Obediah—*mon Dieu*, what a name!—set down in the long ago. Me, I understand the barbarities of your language passably well, but I think we should get the fuller effect by hearing you read aloud. I greatly fear I should make sad hash of this old one's entries. Read on, my friend; I am all attention."

Adjusting my pince-nez, I moved nearer the desk lamp, glanced hastily at the indicated page, then, bending closer, for the once black ink had faded to pale sepia with the passage of two hundred years, I read:

"3d Sept., 1755.—This day came the trained band from fighting with the French; Joshua, my brother, at their head

and looking mighty fine and soldier-like in his scarlet coat and sash and the long sword which swung from his leathern baldric. With them are come a parcel of prisoners of war, holden at the King his Majesty's pleasure. Mostly children and young folk, they be, and though they be idolaters and not of our Christian faith, I find it in my heart to pity them for the hardness of their lot, for from this day onward must they be bearers of burdens, huers of wood and drawers of water, bound to menial service to our people that the Commonwealth's substance may not be eaten up in keeping them in idleness.

"What is it that I say? Obediah, it is well that you are for Harvard College and the law, for the sternness of the soldier's trade or the fiery Gospel of the Lord God expounded by the preachers are things too hard for your silly heart, meseemeth. And yet, while none shall hear me murmur openly against the fate of these poor wretches, I do pity them with all my soul.

"One among them, of all the rest, arouseth my compassion. A lissom chit of a girl, she, with nut-brown hair and eyes as grey as is the sea, and such a yearning in her pale, frightened child-face as might move any man's heart. I hear tell she will be placed at sale on Wednesday next, though it is already understood that Brother Joshua will have her for household drudge in part requital of his valliant work against the enemy. If this be so, God pity the poor wench, for Joshua is a hard man and passionate, never sparing of himself or others, and ever prodigal with fist or whip to urge to greater diligence those who serve him. Already there have been murmurs amongst his black and Indian slaves against his harshness, but so great and dominant is he that none dare stand against him and charge him to his teeth with cruelty."

"*Eh bien, Monsieur,*" remarked de Grandin as I sought the next marked passage in the diary, "it would seem this Monsieur Joshua of yours was the very devil of a fellow."

"Huh, you haven't got to first base yet," Phipps answered, but the grimness of his expression denied the lightness of his words.

I found the second red-checked entry and began :

"29th Sept., 1755.—Have pity, gentle Saviour, for I the meanest of Thy creatures and a sinfull man, harbour thoughts of blood and death against mine own kin. On Lord's Day I visited my brother, and as I made to enter at the kitchen did behold Marguerite DuPont, the Popish serving wench, bearing water from the well. A brace of heavy buckets, oaken-staved and bound with brass, she staggered under, and their weight was like to have borne her down, had not I hastened to her succour.

"A look of passing wonder she gave me as I took the bucket-yoke from off her shoulders and placed it on mine own, and, '*Merci beaucoup, M'sieu'*', she whispered, with the words dropping me a curtsy as though she were a free woman and mine equal in station.

"Her hands are red and rough with toil, but small and finely made, and in the wide greyness of her eyes dwells that to make a man's heart beat faster. Perchance she is a witch, like most of the idolaters, as Parson did expound at meeting that very morning, and works wickedness on men, to the damnation of their souls and bodies. Howbeit, she is very fair to look on, nor do I take shame to myself for that I took her burthen on me.

" '*C'est le sabbat, n'est-ce-pas, M'sieu?*' she asks as I set the buckets down beside the doorstep, and when I nodded, she looked at me so sadly that I was like to weep for very pity.

"From out the bodice of her gown she drew a tiny, cross-shaped thing, a bit of sinfull vanity fashioned like the tree whereon our Lord suffered for the vileness of humankind, and would have raised the symbol to her lips.

" 'And what means this heathenry, ye Papist slut?' bellows my brother Joshua, bursting from the house-door like a watch-dog from out his kennel at scent of a marauder. 'What means such demonyr in a Christian man's house?' with which he struck the fond thing from her hand and caught her such a cuff upon the ear that down she fell beside it.

"Quickly the lass picked the cross from out the sand and would have bestowed it in her breast again, but Joshua was quicker than she, maugre his towering bulk, and ground it under heel, wellnigh crushing her frail hand.

"She sprang erect like a pantheress, her mild eyes all aflame, her cheeks red with rage, and defied him to his face.

"'Thou harlot's brat, I'll learn ye to speak so to your betters!' raged he, and struck her on the lips with his clenched hand, so that blood flowed down her chin upon her kirtle.

"'Nay, brother,' I opposed, 'entreat her not thus despitefully. 'Tis Lord's Day, and she, of all the townsfolk, labours. 'Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy,' saith the Scripture. And as for her vanity in kissing the cross, bethink you that her faith, mistaken though it be, is dear to her as ours is to us.'

"'Now as the Lord liveth,' my brother sware, 'meseemeth thou art half a Papist thyself, Sir Cockerel. Whence cometh this sudden courage to champion the Popish slut? The Sabbath Day, quotha? What knows she of sabbaths, save those wherein the witches and warlocks make merry? Is she not already foredoomed by God His great mercy to burn in hell from everlasting unto everlasting? Sabbath rest and meditation are for the Lord's elect, not such as she. As for thee, go thy ways, and quickly, else I forget thou art my brother, though but a snivelling coward, and do thee injury.'

"Lord Christ, forgive! In that moment I could have slain him where he stood, nor took a thought of guilt for doing it. Alas, in thought, if not in deed, I am another Cain!"

"2d Nov., '55," the next marked entry read. "At college, and hard upon my studies all the day, labouring right toilsomely with the middle voice of Greek, yet making sorry business of it.

"*Mea culpa*; I have sinned. Into my heart has crept insidiously a lustfull and unhallowed love, for between mine eyes and the book wherein I read there floats the vision of the kitchen-drudge, the French girl, Marguerite DuPont.

"What boots it that she be a servant of the Antichrist, a beggar and a charge upon the town, bound for ever to labour for her scanty fare? What matter though she be joined to her idols like Ephraim of old? Surely, though we approach God through Christ, our Lord and Saviour, or through Mary, His maid-mother, the goal we seek is still the same, however different be our roads. And yet I may not tell her of my

love; I dare not clip her in mine arms and whisper 'dearments to her, for she is my brother's thing and chattel, bound to him even as his blackamoors and Indians, though by the letter of the law she is a war-captive and subject to release or ransom or exchange. Wo me, that I have loved a Hagar in the tents of Abraham!"

"Death of a little blue man, Friend Trowbridge"—de Grandin twisted the waxed tips of his small blond moustache—"I damn think I sniff the odour of a romance here. Read on, proceed, I pray you. I burn, I itch, I am consumed with desire for further information!"

"9h June, '56," I read, turning to the next entry marked in red. "O Lord Christ, fill me plentifully with love of Thee, for love of woman never shall be mine! This day sennight Marguerite gave birth to a child, a boy. She holds her peace right stubbornly, though many of the good wives, and even the Parson himself, have urged her to declare her partner in iniquity, that he may stand his trial with her for adultery. Anon, when she be taken from her bed, she must make response for this her sin, and if her paramour be not discovered, must bear the brunt upon herself.

"Brother Joshua shows strange kindness for one so stern and upright, so ever hatefull of all sin. The child is cared for by his orders, and he has even visited the wretched mother to see that all goes well with her. Forgive me, brother, I did thee wrong when I declared thy heart was like a flint. Methinks Marguerite is gratefull for this unexpected comfort, for her eyes brighten when he entereth the room, and dwell on him with the look a gentle dog may give its master when he leaves. The child is dark, unlike its mother, and well favoured withal. 'Tis pity it must go through life as *filius nullius*, according to the lawyers' phrase."

"My brother builds a house without the town," the next entry, dated early in December, read. "The foundations are already digged, and soon the chimneys will be raised. The idea likes me much, for when the building is completed he will take Marguerite and the child to dwell with him, and

she shall thus have respite from the townsfolk's jeers. O Marguerite, my Marguerite, how fondly would I have held thee to my heart, had I but dared; but now it is too late—have pity, Heaven!—too late!"

"Joshua's charity is explained," the next passage, which was undated, announced. "'Twas passing strange that he, who would have flayed a flea for its hide and tallow, should expend money on a bond-woman's brat thus lavishly. Alas, the child she bore is his. Wo unto you, Joshua, my brother, for you have devoured the fatherless! A man of war you call yourself, a valliant battler for the Lord, yet did you hide your shame behind a woman's petticoat, and leave her lonely to brave the storm of calumny, while she, for very loyalty to you, her child's father, forbore to name you to the elders, though they protested never so much.

"25h Dec., 1756.—Wo and calamity. The light has gone from out the stars and the sun is consumed in darkness. Marguerite is no more, and on my brother's brow there sits indelibly the mark of Cain. From Cudjo, his blackamoor slave, I have the story, and though I may not denounce him to the court, for that I have only my unsupported word, since slave may not testify against his master, yet here and now I brand him murderer. Joshua, my brother, *Thou art the man!*

"Together with his black slaves and his Indians, as cut-throat a crew as ever hung in irons, my brother did repair to his new house to lay the hearth. With him went Marguerite and the child. In the darkness of the night he heard her singing softly, and entering her room found her suckling the boy, and round his baby neck she had hanged a garland of plaited vines and from it hung a cross.

"Wild with rage, my brother seized the child from out her arms, and made as though to brain it against the wall, whereat she rose up like a she-bear which sees her cubs threatened, and snatched a dagger from her dress, wherewith she wounded him in the breast.

"'What, wouldst murder thy benefactor, slut?' he bellowed, and the greatness of his angry voice roared through the half-built house like winter tempests through the forest-

aisles. 'By Abraham and Isaac, and by that Joshua whose name I bear, we'll lay the hearth to-morrow morn according to the ancient rites, and my house shall have that to guard it which none other in the colony may boast!'

"With that he summoned help to bind her to the bed and bare the child away.

"At sun-up next day they heard her singing in her chamber, '*Venite adoremus*', the hymn wherewith the Papists greet the Christmastide, but Joshua laughed deeply in his beard and sware a great oath and vowed they'd give her other tunes to sing e'er that day's work be finished.

"When all had been prepared they brought her forth, all bound like any captive for the gallows, and led her to the hearth-place, where a great hole had been digged beneath the setting for the stone.

"At first she did not understand, but presently they made her know that she must be immured alive within that stone-sided grave, for that, my brother saith, her spirit might protect his house and all that therein dwelt. And as he said it he laughed a great laugh, and pointed to his wounded breast wherein her dagger had been fleshed the night before.

"And now she knew her end was come, and hope had fled from her, so there upon the threshold of the grave to which she must all quick descend, she stood and cursed him in the English tongue she scarce could frame to form aright.

"'Wo to thee, defiler of the innocent and craven hider of thy shame,' she told him. 'May the wrath of God be on thy head and countenance, and may thou and thy sons and thy sons' sons from generation unto generation have blood to drink in that hour wherein thy first-born is delivered. May thou and thy seed never look on the faces of thy children or on thy wives in motherhood, and may this curse last while hate shall last and be strong as hatred is strong!'

"What more she would have said they know not, for even Joshua paled before her maledictions, and gave the signal whereat his myrmidons laid her living in the open grave and set the hearth-stone over her. Thereafter they fixed the stone right firmly with cement, and none could hear her cries as she struggled in the tomb like a drowning man fighting for the breath of life."

De Grandin was leaning forward in his chair, and his little, round blue eyes were fixed on me in a set, unwinking stare as I turned to the next entry. Once or twice his long, flexible fingers twitched nervously, and I had no difficulty in imagining what would have happened to old Joshua Phipps could the wiry little Frenchman have set those steel-strong fingers round his hairy throat. Dapper as a dandy, slightly made as an adolescent girl, Jules de Grandin is none the less a born killer, and when his anger is aroused he can, to use the old frontier phrase, "whip his weight in wildcats", and have both strength and inclination left to fight a fresh lot to the death.

Young Phipps, too, sat stone-still in his chair, his breath rasping harshly in his throat as he listened to this tragedy of old New England, and, it seemed to me, the very atmosphere of my peaceful study was pregnant with the presence of those tragic actors whose bodies had moulded to dust long years before any of us had seen the light of day.

"3d Mar., '58," I read. "Joshua this day wed with Martha Partridge."

The next item was the last in the book, and seemed fresher than the others, for the ink retained some semblance of its original blackness:

"25h Dec., 1758.—The curse has fallen. This night, Martha, my brother's wife, who hath been gravid, was delivered of a son whom they will call Eliab. Joshua sate before the fire in his great chair, gazing into the flames and on the hearth-stone which hides the evidence of the filthy act he wrought two little years agone, and thinking the Lord God knows only what thoughts. Did you see Marguerite's pale face in the flames, brother, and did the wind in the chimney recall her pleading voice to you as you waited on the midwife's summons to ascend the stairs? Who shall say?

"Anon they came and said he had a son, and straightway he rose up and went to look on him. At the entrance to his wife's chamber he paused to cast a downward look of triumph at the great flat stone which shelters her whose curse he bore, then laid his hand upon the door-knob.

"And in that moment he who never knew adversity save to conquer it, tasted salt and bitterness, for even as he flung aside the door he fell upon his face, and from his open lips gushed forth a spate of blood which dyed his beard a ruddy hue and stained the planking of the floor. He never saw the features of his lawful first-born son.

"Have pity, Jesu!"

It was dead-still in the study as I closed the little book in which Obediah Phipps had scrawled his record of futile love and stark tragedy. The soft hiss of a pine log in the fireplace sounded distinctly through the shadows, and the mournful hoot of a motor-horn outside came to us through the closed and curtained windows like a doleful period to the tale.

"It sounds fantastic to me," I commented, returning the book to young Edwin Phipps. "I remember the Acadians were expatriated by the New England colonists during King George's War—Longfellow tells the story in *Evangeline*—but I never heard the poor devils were made virtual slaves by the New Englanders, or that they—"

"Many unpleasant things concerning our histories we easily forget, my friend," de Grandin reminded with a slightly sarcastic smile. "Your Monsieur Whittier takes up the tale where Monsieur Longfellow leaves off. However"—he raised his shoulders in a quick shrug—"why hold resentment? The crime the ancestors committed against New France was nobly atoned for by their descendants. Did not the young men of your Yankee Division pour out their virile blood like water in one vast transfusion when *la belle France* bled white with the *sale Boche's* bayonet wounds? But yes. Meanwhile, the descendants of these very Acadians rested comfortably at home, enjoying the protection of Britain's arm, yet lifting no hand to help the land from whence they sprang. I—"

"But that other," I interrupted, for, like all true Frenchmen, my little friend will talk for hours on the War, "that seems preposterous to me. The idea of burying a live woman beneath a hearthstone—why, it's incredible. Such things might have been done in heathen times, but—"

"*Hélas*, Friend Trowbridge, your ecclesiastical learning seems little greater than your political knowledge," de Grandin

cut in. "Those older ones, both pagan and Christian, laid the foundations of their houses and fortresses—even their churches—in blood. Yes. Saint Columba, founder of the abbey of Iona, inhumed one of his monks named Oran alive beneath the walls, because he feared the demons of the earth might tear the holy structure down unless appeased by human sacrifice. Later historians have endeavoured to sugar-coat the facts, but—later writers have revised the story of *Chaperone Rouge* to make the little girl and her *gran'mère* come forth alive from the wolf's belly also.

"Again, no later than 1885, was found another evidence of such deeds done by Christians. That year the parish church of Holsworthy, in north Devonshire, England, was restored, and in the south-west angle-wall the workmen found a human skeleton interred, and its mouth- and nose-places were stopped with mortar. The evidence was plain; it was a live-burial designed to make the walls stand steadfast because of human sacrifice to the earth-demons. Once more: in tearing down an ancient house in Lincolnshire the workmen found a baby's skeleton beneath the hearth. Yes, my friends, such things were undoubtedly done in the olden times, and our Monsieur Joshua was but reviving a dead-but-not-forgotten custom of the past when he did lay the poor one, Marguerite, beneath his hearth."

"H'm," I reflected, "it hardly seems possible such bigotry could have obtained so late, though; just think, the Revolutionary War began only some fifteen years later, yet here was a man so intolerant that—"

"*Eh bien,*" the Frenchman chuckled, "again you do forget, my friend. Your war of revolution was fought and won, also your second war with England, and our own so glorious Revolution was an accomplished fact while yet Catholics burned Protestant and Jew with fine impartiality. It was 1814 when Spain's last *auto da fé* was held. However, we grow unduly reminiscent. It is with Monsieur Phipps's problem we must deal.

"Tell me, young Monsieur," he turned directly to our visitor, "is this house of blood and sorrow where your wicked ancestor met his death still standing, and if so, where?"

"Yes," Phipps replied. "I've never been there, but it's still owned by the family, though it's been unoccupied for twenty-five years or more. I'm told it's in remarkably good condition, however. It stands just outside the present city of Woolwich, Massachusetts."

"H'm," de Grandin took his narrow chin between a thoughtful thumb and forefinger, "I think we should be well advised to go there without delay, my friend."

"What, out to that old ruin, *now?*" Phipps demanded.

"But of course. When water is polluted, the wise man seeks the source of the stream. It seems to me the fountain-head of this family curse of yours may well be found where Marguerite DuPont lies buried in a grave of hatred without benefit of clergy or the tribute of a single tear, save such as your great-uncle Obediah may have shed for her in secret."

"Cab, sir? Taxi? Take you to the best hotel in town," a lean, lank Yankee youth challenged as we alighted from the B. & M. train and lugged our handbags from the Woolwich station.

"*Holà, mon brave,*" de Grandin challenged in his turn, "you know the country hereabouts, I doubt not—and the old-time landmarks as well?"

"Ought to," the other answered with a grin, "been here all my life."

"*Très bon,* excellent; you are the man we seek, and none other. Tell me, can you deliver us in good condition at the old Phipps homestead—you know the place?"

An expression of blank amazement, half-fright, half-disbelief, came on the jehu's lean, weather-stained face. The Frenchman's request, it seemed, was much like that of a tourist in Naples directing that he be forthwith driven to the rim of Vesuvius's crater.

"D'ye mean ye want to *go* there?" the youth demanded.

"Utterly," de Grandin returned. "It still stands and may be reached, may it not?"

"Oh, yeah, you can *git* there all right," the other responded doubtfully, "but—"

"But getting back is something else again, *n'est-ce-pas?*" the little Frenchman retorted with one of his quick, infectious

smiles. "No matter. Do you transport us thither; we shall take responsibility for the rest."

The youth led us to a dilapidated Ford which got under way protestingly and seemed in imminent peril of dropping to pieces at almost every revolution of its wheels, but somehow took us through the wide, well-kept streets of the newer part of the town, along a smooth macadamized highway between rows of pretty white houses, finally up a rutty, clay-surfaced road to the massive cedar gateposts of a wide and weed-choked park.

"*Enfin*, we are arrived, it seems," de Grandin announced as we alighted. "Do you bear a hand with the portmanteaux, *mon vieux*," he tapped the driver on the arm as I felt in my pocket for the fares.

"No, sir, not me," the other declared with emphasis. "I contracted to bring ye here, an' I done it; but nothin' was said about me goin' into that place, an' I ain't goin', neither!"

"Eh, what do you tell me?" de Grandin tweaked his moustache ends alternatively. "Is it, then, perhaps, a place of evil reputation?"

"Is it?" the driver echoed. "Say, brother, you couldn't get the State militia to camp in them grounds overnight, an' I don't mean maybe. O' course, I don't believe in ghosts nor nothin' like that, but——"

"*Certainement*, so much is evident," the Frenchman's features creased in one of his quick, elfin smiles, "but at the same time you prefer not to test your disbeliefs too strongly, is it not? Very well; we thank you for the transportation; as to that in which you disbelieve so staunchly, we shall endeavour to cope with it unaided—also with the burden of our luggage."

The old Phipps farmhouse was, as Edwin had told us, in remarkably good repair for its age and the neglect it had suffered during the past quarter-century. Built at the time when Georgian elegance was just beginning to impress itself on the ruder architecture of the colony, it presented a curiously hybrid appearance. A rounded bay climbed the full height of its façade, porticoes supported by once-white columns ran along the front, but all its many windows were firmly closed with heavy, slab-wood shutters. The door which

pierced the centre of the building was of adze-cut timber, roughly smoothed with a jack-plane and hung on massive "holy Lord" hinges of hand-wrought iron. It seemed strong enough to withstand a siege supported by anything less than modern artillery.

Edwin Phipps produced a key of hammered brass which seemed to me massive enough to have locked the Bastille, fitted it in the iron-rimmed keyhole and shot back the bolts. Hardly conscious that I did so, I wondered that the lock should work thus readily after so many years of disuse.

"*Entrez,*" de Grandin stood aside and waved us forward; "the great adventure is begun, my friends."

The room we entered was like a setting on a stage. Obviously, it was originally intended as both entrance-hall and living-room, possibly as dining-room as well. Loftily panelled in some sort of age-darkened wood, with an open fireplace large enough to drive a limousine through in the blank wall to the left, it gave me the impression of immensity and chill one gets in going through a Continental cathedral. A broad staircase, balustraded in hand-wrought oak, ran up to a gallery above, whence three doors, one to the right, two to the left, gave off. There were also doors letting through the right wall of the hall, but none to the left. At the stairway's foot, by way of newel post, stood a massive bronze cannon, muzzle down, evidently the spoil of some raid led by Joshua Phipps against the French, for engraved on its breech were the Bourbon arms and a regal crown surmounting a flourishing capital *L*. A great table of Flemish oak stood near the centre of the hall; several straight-backed chairs, faded and mouldering with age, stood sentry against the walls. Before the monstrous, gaping fireplace, almost on the hearth-stone, yawned a massive arm-chair, upholstered in tattered Spanish leather. I wondered if this could be the "great chair" in which old Joshua sat meditating that night so long ago when the midwife came to call him to his son, and to the doom pronounced on him and his by the martyred French girl.

De Grandin glanced appraisingly about the place and shook his shoulders as though a chill even more bitter than that of the December day had pierced his fur-lined greatcoat. "*Pour*

*l'amour d'un bouc*, a little fire would help this place immensely," he murmured. "Phipps, my friend, do you dispose our belongings as seems good to you. Trowbridge, *mon vieux*, by your leave you and I will sally forth in search of fuel for yonder fireplace. *Pardieu*, I damn think it will require an entire forest to warm this place to hospitality once more!"

We had included a pair of Boy Scout axes in our outfit, and in a few minutes cut a plentiful supply of dry wood from the fallen trees in the grove outside.

"*Mille pardons*, little one," de Grandin murmured almost humbly as he crossed the wide slate hearthstone to lay the logs in the fireplace; "we do not tread upon your grave with wanton feet."

The short New England twilight faded into dark almost before we had completed preparations for the night. We ate a dinner of fried bacon and potatoes, washed down with plentiful draughts of strong boiled coffee, set up our camp cots on the flagstone floor of the great hall and rolled ourselves in several thicknesses of blankets before ten o'clock had sounded on the tiny folding clock de Grandin had taken from his kit-bag.

"*Bonne nuit*, my friends," he murmured sleepily. "Let us sleep like a clear conscience this night, for we have much to do to-morrow."

The fire had died to a sullen, smouldering ruin and the blackness the leaping flames had driven back once more advanced from the corners of the great, cold hall like a hostile army counter-attacking doggedly, when I wakened with a start. Had I been dreaming, or had there actually been a Presence bending over me, I wondered as I opened sleepy eyes and glanced about. Whatever it was, it had not been hostile, that I knew. For a moment, while I crossed the no man's land between sleep and waking, I had sensed something, something white and slim, bending above me, a pleasant comforting something like a mother soothing her restless child in the night—smooth, calming hands passing lightly over my features, a gentle, murmuring voice, a faint, familiar lovely scent breathing through the darkness.

"Trowbridge, *mon ami*, did you see—did you feel it?" de Grandin's sharp, sibilant whisper came to me.

"Ye-es, I think so—" I began, but stopped abruptly at the sound from Phipps's cot.

"*Ug—ou!*" Half-exclamation, half-frightened, strangling cry it was, and in the quarter-light we saw him rear upright from his blankets, fighting and wrestling for his life with something invisible to us.

Before either de Grandin or I could reach him he rolled from his bed, threshed wildly about the stone floor, then lay still, panting deeply. "It—something tried to choke me!" he gasped as we rushed to his aid. "I was sleeping, and dreamed someone—a woman, I think—bent over me, stroking my cheeks and forehead, then suddenly it—whatever it was—seemed to change, to go savage as a lunatic, and grasped me by the throat. Lord, I thought I was done for, for a while!"

He rose with an effort, accepted a sip of brandy from de Grandin's flask, then sank down on his cot, feeling gingerly at his neck. "'Spect it was a dream," he murmured with a shamefaced grin, "but 'such stuff as dreams are made on' is mighty solid hereabouts, if it were. Ugh, I can feel those long, bony fingers squeezing my gullet yet!"

I was about to reply with some soothing commonplace remark when de Grandin's minatory hiss and upraised finger cut me short. Distinctly through the outside darkness came the echo of a shot, a second report, and a woman's wailing, terrified scream, both curiously faint and far-away seeming, like the sound of a gramophone played in a distant room with closed doors between.

For a moment we waited tensely, then, as the woman's cry was repeated, nearer this time, de Grandin crossed hastily to the front door, snatched up his coat, and flung the portal open. Instantly the muffled quality of the sounds was explained. While we slept before the fire a torrential rain-storm had come up, and, though there was little wind, the skies seemed suddenly converted into sieves which let down countless cataracts of black water.

As I joined him at the door and peered intently through the drumming rain, I descried some kind of indistinct form

blundering and splashing through the welter of mud and water and heard another faint hail: "Help, please help me!"

Side by side the Frenchman and I dashed into the storm, seized the half-fainting girl and dragged her to the shelter of the house.

"Thanks!" she gasped, shaking her head to clear the water from her eyes. "I think I'd have been done in another moment if—you—hadn't—" her voice trailed off, and she bent limply at the knees, as though her bones had suddenly softened, landing in an inert little huddle on the hall's stone floor.

"Mademoiselle!" de Grandin cried in quick concern, bending over her. "Mademoiselle, you are—*grand Dieu*, Friend Trowbridge, she is wounded!"

It was so. On the left arm of the suède trench-coat she wore showed a spot of angry red, and as I leaned down beside de Grandin to help him take away the garment, I saw the leather was pierced by two small holes, one at the rear of the sleeve, the other at the front. Obviously, a bullet-wound.

Working quickly, we removed the girl's overcoat and Fair Isle sports vest, then washed and bandaged the wound as best we could. For lack of better styptics we made a pack of boric acid powder, of which we fortunately had a small can, and crushed aspirin tablets, thus approximating Senn's first-aid dressing. For bandage we requisitioned three clean handkerchiefs from de Grandin's dressing-case. Tearing a towel longwise, we knotted it behind her neck and contrived a fairly satisfactory sling.

"How comes it, Mademoiselle, that you flee wounded through the storm?" de Grandin asked, removing the cup of brandy and water from her lips and watching her returning consciousness with keenest satisfaction. "What *sacré bête* has done this monstrous thing? *Cordieu*, tell me his name, and I shall twist his neck so thoroughly that in future he must walk backward to see what lies before him!"

The girl gave him a smile that was half a grin and wrinkled her nose at him. "I only wish I knew," she answered. "I'd help you do it."

"Joe Darnley and I were driving home from Branchmoor when this storm hit us like a circus tent collapsing. The water

must have got into the gadget that works the jigger-macrank, or something, for we went dead at the foot of the lane leading here. The storm had us all turned 'round, and neither of us knew just where we were, so while he got out to tinker with the thingummy in the engine, I looked around for landmarks. Just as he got the motor to working and we were ready to start, another car came rushing down the road—no lights going, either!—and someone in it shouted for us to get to hell out of there. Guess we didn't move fast enough to suit 'em, for one of them fired on us and struck me in the arm. It hurts like fury, too!" She made a little face, then turned to de Grandin with a brave effort at a smile.

"Joe Darnley's a swine. The contemptible thing stepped on the gas and left me there, wounded and lost. Then I screamed for help and started to run—I didn't realize which way I ran; just ran, that's all. In a few minutes I saw your light, and—here I am." She gave de Grandin another friendly smile, then seemed to stiffen with sudden frightened realization.

"I say," she demanded, "this is the old Phipps house, isn't it? Who—who are you? What are you doing here? I thought this place was deserted—I've always heard it was haunted by—" She broke off with another effort at a smile, but it was easy to see the local superstition was troubling her.

"*Eh bien*, that is a long story, Mademoiselle," de Grandin answered. "However, we are quite lawfully in possession, I assure you. *Permettez-moi, s'il vous plaît*: this is Monsieur Edwin Phipps, one of the owners of the property; this is Dr. Samuel Trowbridge, of Harrisonville, New Jersey. I am Jules de Grandin, of Paris and elsewhere, all very much at your service."

She nodded in frank friendliness. "It's no mere figure of speech when I tell you I'm glad to meet you," she assured us. "My name's DuPont—Marguerite DuPont, of Woolwich, Massachusetts, very much in your debt for services rendered, gentlemen."

"Good gracious!" I exclaimed.

"Marguerite DuPont!" young Phipps repeated in a sort of awed whisper.

"*Sacré nom d'un fromage!* Is it so?" de Grandin ejaculated.

She regarded us with a sort of puzzled resentment. "Of course it's so!" she answered. "Why shouldn't it be? It's a good name, isn't it?"

"Good?" de Grandin echoed. "*O, là, là,* it is a most excellent good name, indeed!" Then:

"Your pardon, Mademoiselle. That name is connected most intimately with the tragic history of this sad and bloody old house, and the coincidence struck us all with force. To-morrow, or the next day, or the next day after that, when you are feeling stronger, we shall explain in detail. Now, if you please, you shall lie down and rest. We shall take especial pains that no harm comes to one of your name in this place, of all others."

After some good-natured argument, we agreed that the girl should occupy Phipps's cot, for the similarity of the charming guest's name to the author of the family curse seemed to have completely unnerved the youngster, and he declared sleep impossible.

Nevertheless, we all dropped off after a time, de Grandin once more rolled in his blankets like an Indian, I lying on my cot watching the leaping flames of the replenished fire, the girl sleeping lightly as a child, her uninjured hand pillowing her cheek; Edwin Phipps sat humped forward in his ancestor's great chair before the fireplace.

It was Marguerite's stifled terrified scream which awakened me. Bolt upright, wide awake as though sleep had not visited my lids, I looked about the great dark hall. Phipps still nodded in the deep leather chair before the smouldering remnant of the fire; de Grandin, apparently, slept undisturbed in his blankets; Marguerite DuPont sat erect in her bed, her eyes wide with terror, her lips parted to emit another horrified cry.

A creak on the wide, oaken stairs leading from the gallery diverted my attention from the frightened girl. Slowly, seeming more to float than to walk, a tall, white-draped form descended the stairs, and behind the folds of fluttering winding-sheet I espied the burning, phosphorescent glow of a

pair of dreadful, luminous eyes fixed on us with a gaze of direful fury.

"*Conjuro te, sceleratissime, abire ad locum tuum!*" the sonorous words of the Latin exorcism rang through the high-ceilinged, echoing hall as de Grandin, now thoroughly awake, hurled them at the gigantic, white-shrouded form bearing down on us.

A moment he paused, as though to test the efficacy of the spell. From the fluttering folds of the advancing thing's cerements there burst a sudden yell of wild, derisive laughter; mad laughter, which seemed to sound the death-knell of all sanity. Time stood still for us as the delirious peal sounded again through the dark place. Then:

"*Ha—so? Pardieu, you would make one sacré singe of Jules de Grandin, hein?*" The Frenchman had risen from his bed, his little, round blue eyes ablaze with concentrated, deadly fury, and the dying firelight glinted balefully on the blue-steel barrel of his pistol.

The shots, following each other in such quick succession that they seemed a single prolonged report, bellowed through the gloom, and the sharp, acrid fumes of cordite stung our nostrils.

The mocking laugh stopped short, like a tuned-out radio, and the sheeted thing wilted, toppled crashing down the last half-dozen steps, and lay twitching spasmodically on the stone floor before us.

"Good heavens!" I gasped. "I—I thought it was a—a—"

"*Un fantôme, eh?*" de Grandin supplied with a half-amused, half-hysterical laugh. "Me, I think that was the intention of the masquerade, my friend. Also, I damnation think they set their stage poorly. In the first dullness of my awakening, I also was deceived, but I heard a step creak beneath his tread, and ghosts do not cause squeaky boards to complain as they walk upon them, Friend Trowbridge. *Alors*, I turned from exorcism to execution, and"—he indicated the prostrate form before us—"it would seem I made a real ghost where a make-believe one was before. I am skilful at that, my friend."

Bending above the sheeted figure, he drew aside its wrappings. Beneath the shrouding of cheese-cloth was a frame of

light wickerwork attached to the man's shoulders, giving him the appearance of being at least ten feet tall. At the top of the frame was fixed a globular arrangement of papier-mâché through which two eye-holes were pierced. Behind each of these burned a small electric flashlight with a green-glass bulb. This accounted for the glare of ghostly eyes we had seen in the spectre's shrouded face.

The man within the winding-sheet was dead. Six tiny nickel-capped bullets from de Grandin's vicious little Belgian automatic had riddled his chest within an area which might be covered by the palm of a man's hand, and from the corners of the dead man's mouth there trickled twin streamlets of blood from his punctured lungs.

"Why, it's Claude Phipps!" Marguerite DuPont's awestricken voice announced. Frightened almost senseless at sight of what she thought a ghost, she had completely regained her courage when the visitant fell before de Grandin's pistol, and stood at the Frenchman's elbow, regarding the dead man's features with wide, fascinated eyes.

"Eh, what is it you do say—Phipps?" de Grandin shot back.

"Yes. His family's lived in Woolwich since I don't know when. He was always a wild sort of chap—never able to keep any kind of employment or stick to anything for long. A little while ago, though, he seemed to be making lots of money, and his funds seemed to increase all the time. We all thought he was playing the stock market. He married Marcia Hopkins last year, and they built a lovely home over by Andover. But—"

"'But', indeed, Mademoiselle," de Grandin cut in. "One wonders. Me, I greatly suspect the stock in which this one dealt was of the kind found in the cellars of gentlemen who preach the virtues of prohibition in public and entertain themselves and their friends with cocktails in private. This ancient, fear-ridden house with its reputation of being haunted—the warning you and your uncourageous escort received when you approached it in the storm—this childish masquerade to frighten off intruders, they point to—"

"Down, my friends! *Ventre à terre!* Keep away from the light!"

Matching his own command with performance, he flattened himself to the floor, and the rest of us followed instant suit.

Nor were we a second too quick. The thunderous roar of sawed-off shotguns resounded even as we dropped, and a shower of slugs whistled murderously over us.

The Frenchman's little pistol barked shrewish rejoinder to the fusillade, and Edwin Phipps, revolver in hand, wriggled forward across the floor, firing rapidly. Somebody screamed hoarsely in the dark, and the sound of rending wood was followed by a hurtling body falling to the hall floor with a sickening thud. For a moment the silence succeeding the mêlée was oppressive; then a whimper from the fallen man before us and a piteous groan from the balcony above told us the battle was ended, all casualties being on the other side.

By the light of our electric torches we examined our late foemen. The fallen man had a shattered tibia, the result of a lucky shot from Phipps's revolver, and a broken collar-bone, sustained when he crashed through the rotting balcony rail and fell breast forward to the stone floor of the hall. The man on the balcony was shot through the left shoulder and the thigh, neither wound being serious, but both bleeding profusely.

For a few moments, with improvised bandages and splints, de Grandin and I worked feverishly. We were rigging a crude Spanish windlass to staunch the wound in our late enemy's leg when Marguerite DuPont's shrill hail came:

"Fire! The house is burning!"

"My God!" our patient cried hoarsely. "Get us out o' here, quick. It's th' stills. There's five hundred gallon o' raw liquor downstairs in th' cellar an' two hundred gallon o' mash. Quick, f'r th' love o' God, before th' place blows up!"

No second warning was necessary. We piled the wounded men on cots and rushed them from the house, found the high-powered car concealed in the crumbling woodshed, and set the motor going. Five minutes later, directed by Marguerite, I piloted the machine along the road to Woolwich.

Our departure was none too soon. Dry as tinder, the old house burned like lighted paraffin, and before we had travelled half a mile along the concrete country road, there came a dull, reverberating roar like the eruption of a miniature

volcano, and showers of sparks and burning brands shot into the rain-washed December night.

"*Eh bien,*" de Grandin commented, "it seems our task is somewhat delayed by this night's business."

"How's that?" I asked, glancing momentarily from the road.

"I mean we must wait till the embers of that wicked old house have cooled—a week, perhaps—then we proceed to draw the fires of an ancient grudge," was his enigmatical retort.

The tale the wounded bootleggers told the police surgeon to whose care we turned them over was not an unusual one. Claude Phipps, ne'er-do-well descendant of the proud old family, had grown to manhood with all the vices and few, if any, of the virtues of his ancestors. Disinclination to work, a passion for spending all the money he could acquire by whatever dubious means came to hand, and a feeling of superiority, ground in him by the futile boastings of his impoverished and snobbish parents, had made him something of a town character, shunned by his own class, granted a sort of grudging welcome by the petty criminals, race touts, and cheap gamblers with whom he consorted. Like many others of his kind, prohibition had provided him with the means of living without appreciable labour. Beginning as lieutenant to a professional rum-runner, he graduated to captaincy of his own small crew, finally adopted the expedient of manufacturing his stock-in-trade in preference to the more hazardous course of running it in from Canada or the sea.

Knowledge of the legends surrounding the old house belonging to the other branch of his family, and the fact that the place had been unoccupied for years, provided him a cheap and relatively safe headquarters for his operations. In the cellar of the old homestead he set up a still, and with the assistance of two companions proceeded to engage in the preparation of liquor of sorts on a wholesale scale. Once or twice natives familiar with the old house had attempted half-hearted investigation of the strange lights and sounds observed there after dark, but the ghost outfit with which the unbidden tenants had provided themselves, accompanied by appro-

priately eerie shrieks and demoniacal laughter, had frightened away the amateur detectives, and Claude and his gang were left in undisputed possession of the place.

Recently, however, more serious opposition had developed, for Salvatore Giolotti, local overlord of the bootlegging industry, had delivered an ultimatum. Claude must either suspend opposition or join forces with him. It was with the threats of the larger organization still fresh in their minds that Claude and his henchmen had discovered Marguerite and her escort apparently reconnoitring the approaches to the house, and fired on them.

The two survivors were for shooting us at once when our presence was discovered, for they had no doubt we were the advance guard of Giolotti's army of occupation, but Claude prevailed on them to let him try his spectral masquerade before resorting to firearms.

"U'm," de Grandin muttered thoughtfully as the wounded youth concluded his recital. "And this Monsieur Claude, your leader, he lived in Andover, did he not? Will you be good enough to furnish his address?"

As soon as our business with the officers was concluded, de Grandin rushed us from the station house and summoned a taxicab. "To 823 Founders' Road," he commanded when we were ensconced in the vehicle.

A light burned brightly in the upper front room of the pretty little suburban villa before which the taxi-man deposited us half an hour later, and through a rear window there showed another gleam of lamplight. A large closed car was parked at the kerb, and as we passed it I noticed it bore the device of Mercury's caduceus beside its licence plate, thus proclaiming its owner a member of the medical fraternity.

No answer came to de Grandin's sharp ring at the door-bell, and he gave a second imperative summons before a light, quick step sounded beyond the white-enamelled panels. A pleasant-faced woman in hospital white opened the door and regarded us with a half-welcoming, half-inquiring smile. "Yes?" she asked.

"Madame Phipps—she is here? She may be seen?" de Grandin asked, and for once his self-assurance seemed to have deserted him.

The nurse laughed outright. "She's here," she answered, "but I don't think you can see her just now. She had a little son two hours ago."

"*Sacré nom! Le sort*—the curse—it still holds!" the little Frenchman exclaimed. "I knew it, I was certain, I was sure; I was positive we should find this, my friends, but I had to prove it! Consider: Monsieur Claude, the worthless, I shot him in self-defence two hours ago; he died with blood upon his mouth. Almost in that same instant his wife became a mother! This is no business of the monkey with which we deal, *mes amis; mille nons*; it is grave, it is earnest. But certainly." He nodded his head solemnly.

"Nonsense!" I broke in. "It was a coincidence; nothing more."

"You may have right, my friend," de Grandin acceded sombrely, "but men have died for less reason than such coincidences as this, and unless we can——"

"Can what?" I prompted as we turned and retraced our steps toward the waiting taxi.

"No matter," he answered shortly. "Hereafter we stand in need of deeds, not words, my friend."

It was almost a week before the fire-ravaged ruins of the old house had cooled sufficiently to permit us to rummage among charred timbers and fallen bricks. The great central chimney stood like the lone survivor of a burned forest amid the blackened wreckage. The heat-blasted stone paving of the hall, supported by the heavy arches of the vaulted cellar, remained intact, as did the mighty fireplace with its arch of field-stones; otherwise the house was but a rubble of fallen brick and burned joists.

The little Frenchman had been busily engaged during the intervening days, making visits here and there, interviewing this one and that, accumulating stray bits of information from any source which offered, particularly interviewing the Italian priest who served the Catholic parish within the confines of which the ancient house stood.

Beginning with a call of perfunctory politeness to inquire concerning her wound, Edwin Phipps had spent more and more time in Marguerite DuPont's company. What they

talked of as they sat before the pleasant open fire of her home while he assisted her with the tea things, lighted her cigarettes, and otherwise made his two hale hands do duty for her injured member, I do not know, but that their brief acquaintanceship was ripening into something stronger was evident from the glances and covert smiles exchanged—silent messages more eloquent than words, intended to deceive the other members of the party, but easily read as hornbook type.

I was not greatly surprised when Edwin drove Marguerite up to the site of the old house late in the forenoon of the day appointed by de Grandin for "*la grande expérience*".

Beside the little Frenchman, his stole adjusted on his shoulders, service book ready and open, stood Father Rizzio of the Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Near the clergyman, viewing the scene with a mixture of professional dignity and wondering expectation, stood Ricardo Paulo, sexton of the church and undertaker to the congregation, and near him rested an open casket, a handsome bronze-plated product of the factories of Boyertown, Pennsylvania, the white silk of its tufted interior shining pallidly in the bright December sunshine.

From a roll of burlap de Grandin produced a short, strong crowbar, inserted its wedge-end between the slate hearthstone and the pavement of the hall and threw his weight upon the lever. "Quick, Friend Trowbridge, lend me your aid," he panted, bearing heavily against the bar; "*hélas*, I lack the bulk to budge it!"

I joined him, bore down upon the crowbar, and wrenched the iron sideways at the same time. With a scraping, rasping sound the slab came away from its anchorage, tilted obliquely a moment, then rolled back.

Before us lay a stone-sided crypt some two and a half feet deep by four feet wide, more than six feet long, floored with a second slab of slate like that we had just wrenched loose. What I expected to see inside I do not know. Certainly, I was unprepared for the sight which met my eyes.

Calm as though she had lain down to sleep an hour before, lay a girl, young, slim, delicate. From the tip of her head to the soles of her heavy brogans with their wide brass buckles she was as carefully arrayed as though clad to attend a meeting

of the townsfolk of old Woolwich. True, her wrists were bound with a twist of knotted rawhide, but the fingers of her hands lay placidly together as though folded in prayer, and on her fresh, girlish features was a look of peace and calm such as few who die "naturally" in their beds are privileged to wear. Too, the preservation of her body was wellnigh perfect; time and death alike appeared to have passed her by, or paused reluctant in their work of destruction at sight of her frail beauty.

But what amazed me more than anything was the startling resemblance the dead girl bore to Marguerite DuPont of twentieth century Woolwich, Marguerite DuPont who even now stepped timidly forward to gaze upon the features which had lain beneath the stone of sacrifice for upward of two hundred years.

"A-a-ah!" de Grandin let his breath out slowly. "She died horribly, this poor one, but peace was hers at last, it seems. Now, Friend *Pasteur*, the time has come for you to—"

Something—a wisp of vapour generated by the burning of the house and confined in a cranny of the hearth-grave, perhaps—wafted upward from the martyred French girl's tomb, floated lightly a moment in the chill mid-winter air, and seemed to settle like a cloud upon the shoulders of young Edwin Phipps. Next instant he had fallen to the pavement, clawing at his neck with impotent hands, making uncouth, gurgling noises in his throat. Already, at the corners of his lips, appeared twin tiny stains of blood, as though a vessel in his throat had ruptured.

"No—no; you shall not have him! He's mine; *mine*, I tell you!" The cry seemed wrung from Marguerite DuPont, who, fallen to her knees beside the struggling man, fought frantically to drive the hovering vapour off, beating at it as if it were a swarm of summer gnats.

"To prayers, Friend Priest! *Pour l'amour d'un canard*, proceed quickly!" de Grandin cried. "You, too, *mes braves*! Attend your duties!" He waved imperatively at the undertaker and his assistants.

"Enter not into judgment with Thy servant, O Lord; for in Thy sight shall no man be justified, unless through Thee he find pardon—" the priest intoned.

Quickly, but gently, the undertaker's men lifted the calm, cold body from beneath the hearthstone, placed it with practised hands in the waiting casket, and closed the lid.

Astonishingly, like steam dissolving in the cold morning air, the baleful white cloud surrounding young Phipps's head began to vanish. In a moment it had disappeared and he lay panting, his head pillow'd in the crook of Marguerite's uninjured arm, her little handkerchief wiping away the tiny gouts of blood from his lips.

Father Rizzio followed the casket. "Eternal rest grant unto her, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon her—" he murmured.

The little Frenchman began to laugh. Sharply his chuckle sounded in contrast to the devotional chant of the clergyman who now stood beside the hearse in which the mortician and his men disposed the casket preparatory to the journey to the graveyard.

"*Barbe d'un bouc*, my friends, it is too droll!" he cried, pausing to wipe his eyes, then giving himself up once more to unbridled merriment. "Me, I know all; I have made much inquiry of late, yet never did I foresee that which has transpired. Jules de Grandin, the very good jest is on you!" And once again he laughed until I thought his sides would surely break.

"Observe them, Friend Trowbridge," he ordered, nodding delightedly to Edwin Phipps and Marguerite. "Is it not an excellently-good joke?"

I looked at him in wonder. Young Phipps was recovering quickly under the girl's administrations, and as he opened his eyes and murmured something she bent quickly and kissed him on the mouth.

"What's funny about that?" I queried almost angrily.

"Forgive my unseemly merriment," he begged as we set out for the cemetery to witness the interment of poor Marguerite DuPont's body, "but as I said before, I knew much which is withheld from you, and might easily have seen that which has happened had I not been one great muttonhead. Attend me, if you please:

"You wonder that Mademoiselle Marguerite resembles her whom we have but a moment ago raised from her uncon-

secreated grave? *Pardieu*, 'twould be strange if it were otherwise. The one is great-great-granddaughter to the other, no less! Consider: When first the young Monsieur advised us of this so mysterious fate which overtook his ancestors, I was greatly interested. If, as old Monsieur Obediah recounts in his diary, the poor one, Marguerite DuPont, lay buried beneath the wicked hearthstone of that evil house, I greatly favoured the idea that the memory of an ancient grudge—resentment which held fast like death—was focused there, for where the misused body lay, I thought, there, in all probability, would be found the well-spring of the malediction which has pursued the Phipses. Therefore, I told me, we must go there, untomb the poor, murdered body of the unfortunate woman, and give it Christian burial. A fervent Catholic she had lived; such, presumably, she had died, though there was no priest to shrive her soul or commit her body to a restful grave. These omissions, they must be remedied, I told me, then, perhaps, she should have peace, and the bane of her old curse might be loosened.

“Very well, to this so execrable old house we did repair, and on that very night comes Mademoiselle Marguerite the second, praying shelter from the storm and from the miscreants who had wounded her.

“Anon, comes that Monsieur Claude, intent on frightening us from out the house, but I am not deceived, and shoot him through the lungs. He dies, and in the same hour his son is born. Thus by accident or deliberate design of the malignant dead, the family curse is once more fulfilled. Yes.

“What I did not then know, however, was that the lady we have rescued was a lineal descendant of that Marguerite DuPont whose body lay almost beneath our feet at the moment. Remember how it are recorded that she bore a son to wicked old Monsieur Joshua? The son assumed his mother's name, since craven cowardice had caused his father to disown him. It is always so, when women love with greater strength than wisdom, my friend.

“At first the scandal of his birth hung on him like a dirty cloak, but those were stirring times, the freedom of the people trembled in the balance, and men were measured more by deeds than by paternity. From out the crucible of war

Jonathan DuPont emerged with glory, and became a leading citizen of the township which had cast verbal stones—if nothing worse—upon his poor, dead mother. His progeny retained his virtues, and the family which he founded now ranks with that from which he sprang. DuPont is now an honoured name in Woolwich.

"This much I learned by much discreet inquiry; what I could not know, because my eyes were everywhere but where they should have been, was that the hatred of the ancestors offered no bar to the love of their descendants. *Parbleu*, that Monsieur Cupid, he shoots his arrows where he pleases, and none may say him nay!"

"To-day, when the last gasp of dying hatred would have overwhelmed Friend Edwin, Mademoiselle Marguerite does battle with her ancestress for the life of him she loves, and *grâce à Dieu*—it did appear that love is lord of hate, and the victory was hers. I am very glad."

Half an hour ago de Grandin and I returned from the pretty home Edwin and Marguerite Phipps have built in Harrisonville. This afternoon their first-born son, Edwin de Grandin Phipps, was christened with all the ceremony ordained by the Book of Common Prayer. There was much to eat, and more to drink attendant on the function, and I regret to state that my little friend returned in a condition far removed from that approved by the ladies of the W.C.T.U.

Seated on his bed, one patent leather shoe removed, he gazed with philosophical concentration at the mauve-silk sock thus exposed. "Friend Trowbridge," he declared at length, "I wish Monsieur and Madame Phipps as many progeny as the Grand Turk boasts. I hope they are all christened in due and ancient form; I sincerely hope they have as much liquid refreshment at future christenings as at this afternoon's so delightful service." A moment he paused, struggling manfully with the other shoe; then, as the footgear came away in response to a tremendous tug, he added:

"And may Jules de Grandin be there to drink it!"

# His Beautiful Hands

OSCAR COOK

I WAS not grumbling. I had given that up a long while. I was merely contemplating the rain, wondering what a whole dry day would be like. And I came to the conclusion that such a phenomenon was impossible—at least until the forty days of St. Swithin were up—that the age of miracles was past. And then, without warning, I shuddered and felt that cold, creepy feeling which premonates a horror spread over me, or rather down me, from my head to my feet.

A presence was drawing near. I realized that immediately and almost as quickly knew whose that presence must be. It must be Warwick—he being the only living soul capable of awakening such sensibility in me. I turned reluctantly from watching the rain to look at the far end of the club smoking-room. Warwick had just entered the door and was approaching.

Before he reached me, I had pressed the bell knob in the wall close to my chair. I knew the necessary adjunct to Warwick's presence was inevitable.

He spread himself over a chair, which he drew close to mine, lighted one of his beastly Philippine cigarettes, blew a mouthful of smoke into my face, and, leaning forward with hands on knees, elbows out at right angles, barked out:

"Well!"

For a moment or so I said nothing. I knew that ambiguous monosyllable, half-question, half-assertion, and the tone in which it was made. A story was coming—and it would not be a pleasant one. While I was still silent, the waiter arrived.

"Two whiskies-and-soda," I ordered.

"Doubles," supplemented Warwick.

I nodded, and looking him squarely in the eyes, paid him in his own coin.

"Well?" I asked, and waited for him to make the next move.

"A yarn," he said, succinctly and succulently. "As good as any I've heard for many a day."

He chuckled. I continued to face him squarely.

"A beastly one," I slowly asserted, "judging from your tone."

He nodded, and at that moment the waiter returned.

Warwick took his glass and I took mine.

"To 'His Beautiful Hands,'" he toasted. "They've earned me fifty guineas and so saved my bacon for a few days. Would you like the yarn, or . . ."

I made a gesture, so non-committable as to mean assent; at least, that is how Warwick read it.

"Listen," he began, looking round to see that we were alone and drawing his chair still closer to mine. "It's a tale of revenge and passion . . ."

"With a capital, purple 'P,'" I interpolated.

Warwick paid no heed. ". . . about as sweetly gruesome and gruesomely diabolic as I know."

He put out the half-smoked cigarette, took a long pull at his whisky-and-soda, and began.

"Did you see that piece in the paper to-day about the sculptor Johnny who lost his right arm?"

I nodded.

"Well, it's that sort of story, only . . ."

I put out a hand quickly to interrupt him. If I must hear the story, I'd hear it properly with full names and details, not shorn of its "curtains" and suspense.

Warwick took the hint.

"I'm going too fast," he muttered, "but even now it rather gets me and . . . well, it's like this. About two years ago I was in the habit of frequenting a lady barber's—there was a craze for them then, now there are only one or two left—and one of the assistants was head and shoulders—metaphorically speaking—above the other girls for looks and personality. She never had a spare moment. I was one of her regulars and there was a fellow, a customer, more than twice her age, always hanging around, whom I grew to hate."

"And he comes into the story?" I asked.

"He is the story," Warwick answered forcefully. "He and Paulina and his violin."

"A musician," I couldn't help saying contemptuously, for, rightly or wrongly, instrumentalists are my *bêtes noirs*.

Warwick grunted annoyance at my interruption, and continued.

"Well, he was dead nuts on Paulina and she, to my disgust, played up to him, or so it seemed. He was always bringing her presents, giving her tickets for his concerts, taking her out of evenings and generally going the whole hog."

Something in his tone and in the choice and emphasis of his last expression seemed to convey a deeper meaning than just the words.

"You mean . . . ?" I asked, and then broke off, for I hate talking lightly of a woman, even an unknown one.

Warwick has no such scruples.

"Exactly," he replied. "She went to be his 'keep', although she stayed on at the shop. But of course this establishment was not set up all at once. It evolved, so to speak, out of what appeared quite natural, though unfortunate, circumstances."

Warwick paused to take another drink.

"And the situation annoyed you?" I asked. "You felt aggrieved, slighted."

He nodded. "In a way, yes. I'm no saint, and I'm a bachelor, and Paulina was . . ."

"Was?" I queried quickly.

For a moment he made no answer. Then, indifferent churchman though he is, he crossed himself.

"She's dead," he said flatly. "Died in childbed, ten days ago. I went to the funeral—a double one—hers and the child's. Thank God it died—that they both died," he added with a sudden fervour, and then slumped back into the chair and relapsed into a silence as inexplicable as his sudden change from ghoulishly-journalistic delight.

I waited. This new mood intrigued me and I sensed a tragedy, more real and personal than Warwick had meant to lay bare. It was obvious that he needed a safety valve.

"Sorry for that display," he said, when presently he pulled himself up in his chair and smiled. "It shan't occur again, but I loved her, in spite of the fact that five generations

ago a coloured strain got introduced to the family. It was that, of course, which . . . but I go too fast."

I offered him a cigarette.

"A story is easier to follow," I suggested, "if it begins at the beginning and not half-way through. So far, all you've really told me is that there's a musician and Paulina and his violin. And you mentioned one more thing, or rather two, 'His beautiful hands'. How do they come in?"

Warwick laughed, an ungodly sound.

"They don't," he said, at length, "they don't. That's the cream of the story, the point of the . . ." He started to laugh again and pulled up short.

"I'm off-colour to-night," he muttered, "but it's like this. This Mr. A., we'll call him that, was a celebrated violinist and apart from realizing the value of his hands he was inordinately vain of them. They were his passion. But I couldn't stand them. They weren't a man's hands and they weren't a woman's. They were . . . were . . ."

"Ethereal," I suggested.

Warwick's hand suddenly gripped my arm tightly, and his face came close to mine.

"The very word," he said. "Ethereal. And it was one of Paulina's jobs to take care of them, tend them, worship them: for that is what he demanded of her—worship of his hands."

I nodded.

"She was a wonderful manicurist with a cool, soothing touch that somehow seemed to linger on your fingers long after the treatment was over and urge you back to her, till you were conscious of a semi-physical, semi-spiritual longing. All of us customers experienced that feeling. And the curious thing is that it wasn't sexual or sensuous, but just caressing."

Warwick paused and looked at me with, for him, a curiously appealing glance, as much as to say: "You *do* understand, don't you?"

I nodded. "The touch of the East," I said gently. "I suppose your Paulina had Javanese blood?"

Warwick smiled his thanks. "You're right," he went on. "And it was really on account of that—taint—that the trouble arose. They're revengeful, the Javanese: they never forget

an injury to themselves or to those they love. Though they're all fire—and Paulina was passionate—they're capable of slow smouldering, like a station waiting-room fire."

Again Warwick paused, and I began to think we never should get to the story. I looked at my watch. The time was 6.30 p.m. In a quarter of an hour I should have to go and dress—I was dining out. I leant across to him.

"So far," I said, "you've really told me little—hardly enough to make me even a trifle curious. Of course, if you'd rather not . . . I'll respect your wish . . . on the other hand . . ."

That was enough. I had touched him on the journalistic raw.

"Wait," he almost barked at me. "Wait. It's a short story, but . . . Well, one day, just a year ago, Mr. A. came into the establishment with the little finger of his left hand bound up. Of course Paulina had to be in attendance. I'd just been finished, and stayed on to have a cup of tea. Naturally, I could not help hearing their conversation—mostly about the finger. The nail had become discoloured and all round the cuticle was puffy and sore. Mr. A. could hardly bear to let Paulina touch it, yet he longed for the caress of her massage.

"She suggested a doctor, but he would not hear of that. She and she only must look after his hands. We could all understand that in general, but not in this case, when medical advice was sorely and obviously needed. He was adamant, infatuated beyond belief.

"A week later, he was back. The finger was worse, much worse, and the third finger was beginning to become affected!"

"And he was still adamant?" I could not help putting the question, for I was rapidly beginning to put two and two together and making four.

"Yes, and so it went on till all the fingers of both hands were in varying stages of affectedness. It was horrible—I say—bloody. Day after day he would come in with his filthy, bandaged hands: undo his bandages, expose his rotting fingers, and talk about them till we customers and the other girls were utterly sick."

"You had your remedy," I interrupted. "Even if the girls hadn't."

Warwick looked at me pityingly. "That's just what we hadn't got." He spoke in a most matter-of-fact way. "Something held us, drew us. Of course, the proprietress was doing a roaring trade, but we didn't care. We sensed something; what, we did not know, but we meant to be in at the death."

"And Paulina?"

"Was her usual sweet self, controlled, gentle, amusing, sympathetic, efficient. Without a flinch, at least an outward blench, she attended to the ghastly sights; passed from Mr. A., to whom she was all kindness, to other customers. So matters went on till one day, just after Mr. A. had gone out, one of the girls was crossing the room and slipped on something on the floor. It rolled under her feet. She thought it was a pencil and stooped to pick it up. Then an awful scream rang through the room and she fell down in a faint. We rushed to her: by her side, where it had fallen from her grasp, was the middle, rotting finger of a man's hand."

"Severed?" I gasped, gripped at last.

Warwick shook his head. For a moment or so he could not speak.

"No," he managed at last. "No. It had just rotted off—and the stink as one touched it was enough to . . . to . . ." he put his hand to his nose and shivered all over.

By a freak of the weather the rain had ceased and the evening light flooded through the smoking-room window. It brought us back towards normal.

Warwick shook himself.

"Do you want the rest?" he asked.

"I've just time," I said, looking at my watch.

Warwick drained his glass.

"We picked up the girl and carried her out, leaving for the moment only Paulina in the room. I was the first to return. As I entered, she quickly put her hands behind her back, but she had not been quick enough, for I distinctly saw that she was holding the rotting finger.

"I went up to her and put a hand on her shoulder, horror-struck though I was.

"'Paulina,' I cried. 'Tell me truly . . . in spite of . . . of . . . you love him?'

"Her immediate answer was to laugh hysterically. Then she held out her hand on which lay the filthy, rotting finger.

"'Could you love *that*? ' she asked.

"I couldn't answer, but my whole face expressed volumes.

"'Then why insult me?' she spoke very bitterly. 'That's what I think of him . . . and all men . . . fit for the scrap-heap,' and as she spoke she carelessly flung the horror into the waste-paper basket. It fell with hardly any thud, but the fall sent up a cloud of stenchful vapour. Paulina seemed not to notice it. 'I only wish . . .' she began, then stopped as the others came back.

"That was the beginning of the end. Paulina gave notice—the proprietress would not dissuade her—and consequently Mr. A. gave up coming. The last time he came, he showed us both hands, devoid of fingers and thumbs . . . and all the time he raved of Paulina."

"And you—kept up with her, married her—the dead child was yours?" I put the question very gently.

Warwick spread out his hands.

"You'd think so," he said, a trifle grimly. "And it should be so, according to the best novels, but you'd be wrong. No. I lost sight of her, too, till just before the end she sent for me and told me all."

"In confidence?"

He shook his head.

"Not necessarily, but I must get it off my chest, and I'd like you to know. Can't you guess?"

I did not try, and he went on.

"Mr. A. was her father. Eighteen years before he had seduced and left her mother. There's no need to say more. This was Paulina's revenge. She'd nursed it for years—remember her Javanese strain."

"You mean . . . ?" I gasped, in spite of myself.

"Exactly. She used a native poison . . . a secret from her ancestors on that side—now dead with her. She planned the whole thing. And to help her attract him and others—myself included—she doped our tea and coffee with a filthy,

horrible concoction brewed from—no, I can't even mention that to you."

The rain was falling again. Gloom once more pervaded the room. My thoughts jumped to the funeral.

"And the baby?" I asked.

"Was Mr. A.'s too," Warwick answered with a return to his ghoulishly-journalistic appreciation of a dramatic point. "Paulina didn't get up early enough, as the saying is, quite to get top-side of him. Just before she'd decided to apply the poison trick through his nails, he'd got her drunk one night and . . . well, you can guess the rest. That settled the matter of her living with him. Talk of poetic justice. . . . Ye gods! I've never heard of such a case. Him with rotting fingers, dying by inches—there's no cure—the poison's in his blood. Paulina, as good as a murderer, dying in childbed—and her baby still-born—born with no fingers—nor toes—hardly hands and feet—just red, puffy lumps of flesh, not even webbed."

He pulled out a cigarette-case, lighted a cigarette, and put the case back.

"I'll have another whisky-and-soda—double," he said, "and then I'll toddle along to the dogs. . . ."

# The Seeds of Death

DAVID H. KELLER

THE Duke of Freud was distinctly unhappy. He had spent a year's income in entertaining one lady who had been so unappreciative that she departed for Paris at the end of the week, leaving the Duke absolutely alone in New York. The worst part about the whole affair was his gradually appreciating that she had engaged her passage a week before she vowed eternal devotion to him. Irrespective of anything that he might do, the Duke realized that his bankers would make him no further advances for at least another year. The world was indeed dreary. Other ladies would be impossible without more money.

The Spanish ambassador gave a very profuse denial to his telegraphed request for a loan. The hotel where he had luxuriated since his arrival in New York became suspicious and sternly asked for a settlement in full. Finally, the Duke walked out on the pavement a free man, but all of his baggage and much of his jewellery remained in the hotel. For the first time in his life the Duke was without visible means of support. The manager of the hotel had promised to let him occupy his room for a few more days, but there were to be no more wonderful meals served there.

The Duke visited a three-ball shop and pawned some jewellery that he had managed to conceal from the hotel management. Then he bought some hard bread and several evening papers and returned to his room. For the first time in his life he read over the "Help Wanted" section. This innovation was more successful than he had thought was possible. There was actually an advertisement in Spanish, asking for a personal interview, with prospect of interesting service in Spain. A telephone number was given, which was to be used that evening only between the hours of eight and ten. This gave the Duke ample cause for reflection as he munched the hard bread and drank ice-water.

It was a day of surprises. It started in the morning with the unexpected desertion of the lady and it ended at nine that evening with a visit from the gentleman who had inserted the advertisement.

James Garey lost no time in giving the reason for the visit.

"I am looking for a man," he said, "who is not afraid to die."

"You have found him!" answered the Duke, shrugging his shoulders. "In my present condition I am better off dead than alive. Of course," he said reflectively, "it all depends on the manner of the death."

"That is the bad part of it," the New Yorker said. "I think that death is there waiting, but I am not sure of what form it takes. It is a peculiar story; in fact, it may be that you will find it even stranger than I do, or you may understand it. I had a brother who had everything in life to live for—and he went to Spain—to visit a lady there—and he never came back. Several other men that I have heard of have visited that lady, and they have never come back. The American Ambassador to Spain has investigated the matter; in fact, he has personally been to see the lady, and his report is a most interesting one. She admits that these men have visited her, she even shows where they signed her guest-book, and in every case she proves that in a few days they left her castle in their automobiles. She regrets their disappearance; she cries pathetically as she recalls how happy they were when they left and how they promised to visit her again on their return to Spain. The lady is very wealthy, belongs to one of the oldest families in Spain, and, thus, there can be no question of robbery. She is said to be well chaperoned, as are all the Spanish ladies, and she made a very favourable impression on the ambassador; so much so that he scouted the idea of foul play.

"I loved my brother, and I believe that he died in that castle. I also think that the other men died there. So I am going to visit her, and I want you to follow me. Four days after I enter that castle I want you to visit the lady, and I want you to find out what happened to my brother. If I am alive, I will help you; if I am dead, it may make it easier for you to solve the problem of my brother, for the

trail will be fresher. You will, of course, understand that you are likely to die in the same way that these other men have died."

"I wonder if I know the lady," the Duke mused.

"It may be that you do. Her name is Helen Moyennes. She seems to have some kind of a title, lots of money, and she lives in a very old castle on the mountain-top of Andorra."

"Helen," replied the Duke, "is not a Spanish name."

"Perhaps not, and, perhaps, the only reason she is called a Spanish lady is because she lives in Spain. She is a brunette of uncertain age, and the ambassador, in a personal letter to me, commented on her beauty."

"I do not know her," said the Duke. "I know a good many beautiful ladies, but not this one. The last one I knew left for Paris this morning with jewels that cost me a year's income. That is why I answered your message in the newspaper. I will go on this adventure with you. If the lady kills me, she will be the first lady who has done so. I suppose that this ambassador will provide me with letters of introduction, and you will have to get my clothes and jewellery out of pawn; at present, the hotel holds them as security."

"I will get them for you, and for the rest of your time in New York you may stay with me as my guest. I am busy in the daytime, but every night for the next week we will talk over our plans. We will leave for Spain in a week. In the meantime, I will make you an advance of five thousand dollars, and you can go ahead and have as good a time as you want in the daytime. This may be your last visit to New York."

"You are not very cheerful."

"I have no reason to be. Frankly, I believe there is a good chance that I shall die in that castle; you may die there; I hope that one of us will clear up the mystery of my brother's death. Then there are some more men like Southward of Atlanta and Serriano of Boston. There is one odd thing about these men that have disappeared, and that is, they were all fine specimens of manhood, and they were all travelling by themselves. For some reason all were in automobiles without chauffeurs. They went to that castle;

there seems to be proof that they left the castle—at least, that is the statement that the lady and her servants make; and then they simply dropped out of existence. How does it look to you?"

"I do not think they left the castle," answered the Duke.

"Do you think that they are dead?"

"Either dead, prisoners, or so happy that they are willing to shut themselves off from all communication with the world."

The New Yorker shook his head. "They may be dead, or they may be prisoners, but these men are not staying there voluntarily. There are too many of them—they would be jealous of each other."

"Not if this Helen were a Messalina, or a Circe."

"No. She is not that. If she is, she has the ambassador badly fooled. Besides, I know my brother. He was not averse to a love-affair with a lady, but he never would allow a rival in the field. If ever there was a jealous man in regard to the ladies, it was my brother. I can imagine him staying in that castle a lifetime with this Helen, but not a minute after he found out that there were other men there. If he is there, he is kept there, either dead or a prisoner."

"Time will tell about this Helen," sighed the Duke. "You are sure she is beautiful?"

"Absolutely."

"That one fact makes the adventure attractive. Suppose you stop at the desk on your way out and rescue my trunks. To-night I spend here. To-morrow I come to your abode as your humble guest. A month from now we may dine in Paradise; but to-night I shall rest better if I have on my silken pyjamas."

For the next week the evenings were spent in planning the Spanish adventure. A hundred suggestions were made, only to be discarded. Finally, they saw what they had dimly seen from the first. James Garey would visit this lady as her house guest. During those four days he would try to solve the mystery of his brother's disappearance. On the fifth day the Duke of Freud would arrive at the castle. He would

either meet James Garey or he would not. If he did not, then he could take it for granted that the New Yorker had fallen a victim to the same fate that had overcome his brother, the same that had been the undoing of Southward of Atlanta and Serriano of Boston, and other good men. One plan that was suggested was finally adopted. James Garey was to wear a ring with a large stone. This stone had a peculiar property. When rubbed against other stone or wood, it left no mark. When, however, the moist skin, as the palm or finger-tips, rested on this place, a red stain appeared on the skin. The two men tried it, and when Garey carefully wrote "Death" on the top of the mahogany table and the Duke carefully pressed the palm of his hand on this spot, then the word "Death" appeared in red letters on his hand.

"That works very well," commented Garey, "and the average person would believe that in this ring we had a very valuable way of communication, but, in reality, I doubt its real worth to us. I could not write messages all over a castle without being seen, and if I only wrote in a few places you would never know where those places were and would find them only by accident. If we both knew the castle, it would be different. As it is, the best we can do is to presume that there is one special guest room, and if, when you come, you have the good fortune to be placed in the same room that I slept in, you will find a message from me on the wall above the door."

During the next week the Duke had to find some occupation for his days, the evenings being spent in apparently useless conferences with his fellow adventurer. The Duke was a peculiar combination of globe-trotter, scholar and libertine. Naturally, he drifted in these idle moments to Broadway, and there, on the first day of his new life with Garey, a sharper fleeced him out of a hundred dollars by means of the old familiar shell game. One pea and three walnut shells and "You can see where I put the pea, gentlemen; now back up your confidence in yourself with a small bet." The Duke was interested, and envious. It pained him to think that anyone could work a trick like that on him; so he took the sharper into his confidence, showed him several unusual card tricks

and offered him another hundred if he would teach him the trick. He saw possibilities in this as a valuable help in times of future financial stringency, and he was confident that such times would come.

He spent several hours with the shell man and then started to practise. Again and again he flipped the pea where he wanted it. For the next six days he practically lived with a pea and three walnut shells in front of him on a table. He practised on the servants in the Garey household and finally was able to deceive even the butler. Then he tried the game on his employer, and that worthy was willing to admit that it was impossible to keep his eye on the pea with any degree of accuracy. By the time the two men sailed for England, the Duke was so proficient that he was able to make a considerable sum on the voyage—of course, in a very gentlemanly way.

The plan of action determined on by the two men was as follows: Garey was going to the castle in Andorra via Paris; the Duke was to go by way of Barcelona. Their date of departure from London was so timed that the Duke would arrive at the castle exactly four days after Garey. After leaving London, the two men were not going to communicate with each other. According to their programme, the schedule seemed fool-proof. As a final protection, a complete statement of the entire plan, with Garey's suspicions, and a complete programme of the intended investigation, were sent in a sealed envelope to the American ambassador at Madrid, with the request that it be opened and acted on if neither Garey nor the Duke of Freud called at the ambassador's office before a certain date.

The parting at London was rather dull. Both men were depressed. In the short time that they had been associated with each other they had developed a decided friendship. They were drawn together by a sense of impending danger. The Duke became almost melodramatic in his profuse promises to leave no stone unturned to unravel the mystery and, if necessary, to avenge the threatened death of James Garey. So they said good-bye.

Some weeks later the Duke of Freud slowly drove his Isotta-

Fraschini up the winding mountain road that led to the castle in Andorra, occupied by the fair Helen Moyennes. In his pocket he carried a letter of introduction from the American ambassador; on his Fedora a small blue-bird feather shone in the cold, clear sunlight, and in his breast his heart beat almost as fast as the slow explosion of his engine—for the path was so steep that even his powerful car was forced to go up on low gear. A little village huddled, as though in fear, at the bottom of this mountain. The Duke considered pausing a few minutes to obtain the reaction of these mountain folk to the grand lady who lived, in every way, above them, on the top of the mountain; however, he ended by driving through without a stop.

Accustomed though he was to Spanish architecture, this castle impressed him as being somewhat out of the usual, a castle so old as to be uninfluenced by the Moorish occupancy of Spain, a large pile of stone so massive that it towered above the peak, and yet the individual rock was so weather-beaten and covered with moss and fern that at some turns of the winding road it came into sudden view, not as a castle, but rather as a part of the ageless mountain. There may have been windows in the walls, but these were so narrow and the walls so thick that they showed as lines rather than modern apertures.

The Duke had spent a few hours talking with a celebrated Spanish historian about this castle. The opinion given by this antiquarian was that the building was very old. In some respects the architecture was Norman, in other ways the Gothic influence showed; and the best description available included a row of columns that were said to be Roman. It seems that no one had occupied the place for many years, and then this very rich lady, Helen Moyennes, had bought the place, and had now lived there for five years. No one that the Duke talked to in Madrid seemed to know much about this new owner of the castle. Even the police department had no knowledge of her past and very little of her present. She spent money lavishly and was very prompt in paying her bills. Also, in some way, she had powerful political influence. That was all that the Duke found out about her.

Now, he was going up to the castle and, for all he knew, he might never come down again.

All the men that had gone up that road had been well educated; some of them had, by their personal efforts, become rich. There was not one fool among them, and yet, none of them had come back.

What had happened to them? Were they staying there in the castle from choice?

*Or were they dead?*

He came near the top of the mountain just as the sun was sinking for its long night's rest. Streaks of light hovered in long, neurasthenic fingers on the castle walls, throwing the ancient rocks into every possible shape of syncopating greys. A low wind, moaning upward from the valley, whined miserably around the massive walls. The road came to an abrupt pause before a great gateway with a Gothic arch, its deep shadows showing the wonderful thickness of the walls. The gate was shut. The engine puttered to a pause, and silence hovered over the castle, with the downy wings of twilight teasing the anxious mind to thoughts of depressed mystery.

The Duke had, in his youth, received an excellent literary education. Now lines from the deep well of his subconscious mind came over his mental threshold: Childe Roland to the dark tower came—fee, fie, fo, fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman—and blew his horn! Without being really aware of what he was doing he looked behind him to see if there was room to swing his automobile around and start down the hill. There was no one there to see him; apparently his arrival had not been noticed. While he was thinking these thoughts, he saw the great gate divide in the middle and slowly swing open. Apparently he had been seen and the way had been provided for him to drive into the courtyard.

Starting the car, he glided into the courtyard and stopped. A noise made him look backward, and the gate was already closing.

“The lady wants to keep me,” the Duke muttered to himself.

And then an old woman came from a little doorway toward the car. In Spanish she asked him to follow her. He pretended not to understand, and she repeated the request in

very good English. The Duke shrugged his shoulders, and thought that it was very much like a page out of Perrault's fairy-tales.

The old dame took him to a bedroom that was a curious combination of the very old and the ultra-modern. For instance, a completely-furnished bathroom provided every possible convenience to the dusty traveller. A sad-faced valet was in attendance, and the Duke's baggage had been brought up with him and was being unpacked by the black-clothed servant. The sound of running water assured him that a bath was being drawn. As in a dream, he heard the servant ask if he wished to be shaved or would he prefer to shave himself. It was all perfect.

Half an hour later another sad-faced man entered and asked him if he was ready for supper. It seemed that the Lady Moyennes awaited the Duke's pleasure in the supper-room. Somehow it did not seem real to the Duke. There was too much regularity to it, too much that he could not understand. It seemed as though he were an actor in a play that went too smoothly!—ah! That was it! It had to be well done, because it had been so often done by these servants—how often had that sad-faced valet drawn the bath for some bright-faced, anticipating young man who sought adventure and love in Andorra? Where were those young men now? And would he play the same part in the tragedy that they had played?

He told the butler that he would be ready in a few minutes and took one of his suitcases into the bathroom and closed the door. There was an automatic in that piece of baggage, but when he took it up and looked at it, he found that all of the cartridges had been taken out. He could not believe that this had happened since he arrived at the castle. Was it possible that a confederate in the hotel in which he had passed last night had made him defenceless? At least, this was the first sign of danger, and was depressingly suggestive. He was glad that he had that dagger in its leather case, strapped to his leg under his trousers. It would not be as useful as a revolver, but in a pinch he could use it to good advantage. At least, it made him feel better to have it strapped on his leg. Going into the bedroom, he told the

butler that he was ready to follow him to the supper-table.

In a room that was so small that a charming sense of intimacy was possible, but with so high a ceiling that the candles failed to show any of its detail, the Lady Helen Moyennes awaited the Duke of Freud. The aristocratic Spaniard was well acquainted with the beauty of the feminine world, but even his blasé soul was aroused by the superb woman who faced him. He dimly felt that she was tall, but there was a delicacy about her that minimized her height. Her closely-fitting *décolleté ensemble* showed a form that was almost massive, and, still, there was but little indication of the tremendous strength that must be associated with such a powerful body. All this and a hundred other thoughts flashed through the Duke's mind as he bent forward to kiss her outstretched hand. Her long fingers, ending in pointed nails, gathered together his varied, fragmentary thoughts into a harmonious whole.

He thought to himself, "This woman is a tiger. All ladies are cats, but this beautiful one is a supercat."

If Lady Helen had any other thought save that of bored politeness, she did not show it in her attitude. In a minute they were at the small table, set for two.

"I always have the service set for a guest," explained the languid woman. "Life here is dull, but now and then, from all over the world, very exceptional people drop in on me, so I am always prepared. Day and night a watchman is on the wall. When an automobile arrives at the gate, he has orders to open it. After it is in the courtyard, there is time enough to learn the business of the occupant with me. Of course, important guests, like yourself, are always anticipated and prepared for. It is necessary to do this, especially in regard to the food. You realize that most men enjoy good meals, and the habits gastronomical of different nations are so different. You are my first Spanish guest. Is that not odd? Men from England and Italy and even a very wonderful Turk, to say nothing of those charming but rather blunt Americans, have visited me, but never till this evening have I had the pleasure of entertaining a real member of the

Spanish nobility. Naturally, when I heard that you were arranging to see me, I wondered what I could do to make this visit one that you would remember—it seemed to me that a man with your sense of beauty needed something more than a heavy supper; so, I thought it would be fitting to make you a little present, even before you taste the grape-fruit. Manuel, bring in that silver casket, and place it before the Duke."

A massive jewel-case was placed on the snow-white linen cloth.

"Now, my dear Duke," almost purred Lady Helen, "when I heard that you were on your way to see me, I thought that it would be best to give you jewels—not just ordinary jewels, but some very fine ones that would have a special significance to you; so I arranged to obtain some in Paris. A very notorious young lady arrived there a few weeks ago, and I obtained some from her that she had brought from New York. You are so fond of jewels, perhaps you may have seen these before? Also, there is a ring."

The puzzled Duke opened the lid of the jewel-case and carefully examined the individual pieces. It did not take long for him to recognize them as the ones that he had spent a year's income on. And, at the bottom of the box, a ring. Of course, there are often many rings in the world that look exactly alike, and yet, as the Duke looked at it, he was struck at the resemblance to the ring worn by James Garey. But this was no time to betray himself by any outward show either of anxiety or of perplexity. He slowly broke into one of those famous smiles that made him such a charming favourite with the other sex.

"You have conquered me!" he exclaimed. "I never could resist jewels. Courtesy on my part demands that I accept this gift, and I am sure that your sense of pity for a beauty-starved man will make you willing to grant my request and wear these jewels during the rest of my visit. When I take them with me, they will be all the more precious to me because you have worn them, at least, for a little while. This ring, however, I will at once put on and cherish, for there will be hours, as your guest, that convention will deny me the sight of your smile, and, during those lonely hours, the wearing

of this ring will comfort me till you again dispel the midnight of my sorrow with the dawn of your fair face."

"I think that was very nicely said," replied the Lady Helen. "I am beginning to regret the wasted years during which I never even realized how charming a true Spaniard could be. I feel that my cosmopolitan tastes have played me false, and in my search for a real man I have been unfortunate enough—and met you only to-night."

They smiled at each other and began to eat.

Soon he selected a bracelet and begged for the opportunity of personally placing it on her wrist. In touching her skin he felt a warm, vibrant tingling thrill that roused the slumbering silences of his masculine ego.

Again she smiled on him, as she said, "For years I have been looking for a real man."

Lazily leaning toward her he whispered, "I trust that from to-night on you need no longer look."

"I want a man that will gamble with life—and love."

"You have found that man."

"I am in great trouble."

"I will share it with you."

The meal finally ended—with the butler discreetly absent, no chaperon in sight, and a close harmony already existent between the tiger woman and the Spaniard, who was already wondering just what the end would be of the game that he was playing. However, he did not wait long, for she suddenly asked him to excuse her. She was tired and felt that he was also fatigued with the events of the day. She promised to see him on the morrow and to confide in him, to tell him her troubles, but just now—a white arm stretched toward him, a white hand rested on his to receive his nocturnal salutation—and then the butler appeared to escort him to his bedroom.

Dully, he closed the door. He found the valet waiting and told him that there was nothing more for the night. After the servant had left, he locked the door and lit several candles. Carefully he examined the plaster on each side of the doorway. It was scratched with the wrinkles of antiquity. He placed his hands first on one place and then another against the wall, and, after each pressing, looked carefully at

the palm. Finally, a red mark appeared on the skin. He replaced the palm exactly over that piece of plaster and held it there while he counted thirty. This time a little flag showed on his palm, and it was a red flag. The red flag of danger! The Duke laughed silently. He did not need a red flag to tell him of the danger he was in. Poor old James Garey—he had meant well—but where was he now? A sudden thought came to him. He took the ring on his finger and carefully wrote the word ‘‘Danger’’ on the white plaster. When he had finished, there was no mark visible, but when he pressed against it with his palm, the word appeared in red letters on his moist skin.

There was no mistake. On his finger was the ring that James Garey had worn when he entered the castle. He had worn it long enough to trace the warning flag—perhaps he had tried to leave other messages—but now the ring was on another man’s finger, and where was Garey? How much did this devil of a woman know? She had known about his buying those jewels for the woman in New York, and had been able to anticipate his visit in time to recover those jewels and give them to him. Of course, it was a left-handed gift. She could take them away from him—but that was not what was worrying him. How did she know about the woman who went to Paris? In what way had she found out that he was going to visit her? She must have known that almost before he and Garey left America. Anyone could see that the very fact that she gave him Garey’s ring showed that she had a fair idea of what that ring could be used for.

With a deep sigh, the Duke undressed and went to bed. Garey was either dead or alive, according to the whims of this woman. So were all the other young men who had been drawn to this castle by rumours of the wondrous beauty of the owner. “Well,” reflected the Spaniard, “to-morrow will tell the tale. The tigress must have some weak spot. But what in the name of all the holy saints is her reason? What is she? A real woman, or a salamander?”

The morning came, and with it the sad-faced valet, a bath and a very remarkable breakfast, served in the bedroom. Later came a message from the lady. She had heard that

the Duke could drive a car. Would he object to showing her his ability? The Duke did not object, but for the next three hours teased death a thousand times on the steep roads, bordered on one side by high mountains and on the other side by ravines that seemed to have no landing-place. As one thrill followed another, the woman by the Duke's side became enthusiastic.

"You can drive a car!" she purred. "I think you are a real man."

Finally they returned to the castle. The lady, pleading indisposition, begged to be excused, but promised to meet the Duke at the supper-table. There, dressed in an Oriental fantasy of laces and pearls, she appeared more charming than ever. But it was not her beauty, nor yet the excellent food, that impressed the Duke; rather it was a flower that she wore on her corsage. This flower, though its stem was blood-red, had white petals, almost dead-white, and thick, as though made of wax. The stamens and pistils were red, but that was not the remarkable thing about them. They were long and seemed to move caressingly over the white bust of the Lady Helen Moyennes. And when the ends of the red stamens touched her skin, the woman seemed to be pleased.

For a while the Duke thought that he was imagining all this—he did not wish to be impolite by looking too long at the flower and at the low-cut gown that it was pinned on. He shivered. It was fastened by a gold snake. Perhaps it would be best for him not to drink any more. Of course, it was just a gold snake, but—damn it!—what made the eyes glitter that way?

The lady noticed his close attention. She laughingly asked, "Do you like my flower?"

"It is beautiful because of its location. May I ask the name?"

"I do not know. I have a few plants growing here. Occasionally one blossoms and then I wear it, though often I prefer the blossom to go to seed. Do you like it? Would you like to see one grow? You may if you stay here. I should like to have you do that. You are a real man. For years I have wanted a real man—one who could make me love him

and fear him and shrink under his wild caresses. Some of the men who have visited me have been such gentlemen that they bored me."

"I think I should like to see the plants," answered the Duke. "And, under certain circumstances, life might be very pleasant here."

"If once you saw the plants, you would want to stay. You are like all the other men—so jealous! But we have come to the end of the supper. You were so busy watching my orchid that you did not eat much. It is early; let us go to another room and play a game of cards. Do you know any new game of chance?"

The Duke thought of his three walnut shells. He excused himself and, guided by the butler, went to his bedroom to get them. On his return, the Lady Helen preceded him to a small room. It is interesting to note that during the days that the Duke stayed at the castle he never learned its geography sufficiently to find his way without a guide.

The lady awaited him in a small room, hung with black velvet drapes. The floor was covered with a carpet so thick that the silent footfalls sounded like the ghostly steps of pedestrians long dead. In the centre of the room a small card-table and two chairs provided ample furniture for a card game. On one side of the table an iron stand provided support for an ash-tray of jade. Even as he was sitting down, the Duke saw that this iron was shaped like a dragon, a rather hideous feminine dragon, with red eyes; he wished those eyes did not stare that way.

So, between cigarettes, the two showed each other tricks of cards and walnut shells, and, finally, of very proper, almost sedate, early Victorian love. Lady Helen was fascinated by the shell game. She finally admitted that the Duke's ability was too much for her.

Pleased, he boasted, "The hand is quicker than the eye."

That night, on returning to the room where his valet awaited him, he quietly shut and barred the door. He kept the servant busy with a few odd tasks while he took off his evening clothes and put on a more comfortable soft-collared shirt and slippers. Then, almost before the valet knew what had happened, the

Duke had him on the floor with the sharp point of a very business-like dagger pressing against his throat.

"Now you can get me the ammunition for my gun," he whispered.

"Your gun is loaded, sir."

"You are a liar!"

"No. The next morning after you came she told me to load it."

The Duke carefully searched the man to see that he had no weapons, and then, with the dagger still pressed against his jugular vein, made him walk over and open the travelling-bag. A second's inspection satisfied him that the man had told the truth. The revolver was loaded. That only served to give the Duke one more thing to think about.

He replaced the dagger in his leg sheath, having far more confidence in a gun. Then he told the valet to sit down in front of him. The time had come for a cessation of courtesies, the Duke carefully explained to the valet.

"I am satisfied that you know a great deal about this place," continued the Duke. "I am going to speak very slowly, so you will be sure to understand my meaning. I am confident that you have served all the gentlemen who have visited your mistress. Probably the same programme is rendered for each of us. Now you have your choice: you can either tell me all about it or you can have me slit your throat. What about it?"

"I will tell you all I know, sir."

"You will?"

"Yes, I will tell everything"

"Why? What is the reason for your eagerness? A good servant woud die rather than betray his madam."

"She told me years ago that whenever this sort of thing happened, I should always tell."

"So, other men have threatened you?"

"Yes, sir! Mr. James Garey bruised me severely."

"I see. And where is Mr. Garey now?"

He saw a change come into the man's eyes. He seemed to be looking over the Duke's head. And just then the Spaniard sensed a strange perfume and felt a soft hand on his shoulder as her voice said, "Why not have me tell you?"

He whirled in his chair and faced Helen Moyennes.

She smiled at him, and even in his worried rage he saw that it was a tender, solicitous smile, a pleasant comprehensive smile that should have disarmed his suspicions.

"You are a little like all the other men, Ferdinand, Duke of Freud. I tell you that I am in trouble and that you can help me and, at once, you think the worst things about me that you can and try to corrupt or threaten my servants. Why were you not frank? I gave you jewels. I even offered to share everything with you—for the rest of my life. I am afraid that I love you, Ferdinand."

The Spaniard looked at her. He felt that she was either speaking the truth or was a wonderful actress.

"I think that I shall call your bluff, Helen Moyennes," he answered. "If you will tell me the mystery of the missing men and give an explanation that is satisfactory to me, I will accept it as proof of your love, and I think that you are beautiful and lovely enough for me to spend the rest of my life with—and when I love a woman, I usually satisfy her."

"That would suit me. I think that when I tell you my story, you will understand. Of course, the men are dead—at least, most of them—but if they wanted to kill themselves, am I to blame? Come into my private rooms, and let me tell you about it."

"I will, but this valet goes along."

"To what purpose? What does he know that I cannot tell you?"

"And you are going to tell me everything?"

"Everything."

The Spaniard followed the woman into her room. His dagger had been replaced in its leather case, but he held the revolver in his right hand. He was very careful, walking down the long hall; he did not favour a knife-thrust from behind in the dark.

Once in her bedroom, he sat with his back to the wall; no confederate of this tigress was going to get the best of him! From that place of security he noted, for the first time, that since supper time the lady had changed her dress. Now she had on a white lace *négligée* that gave a general impression of

extreme intimacy. In fact, the Duke felt that it was intended to impress him—to pity and, perhaps, to other more subtle emotions. The orchid that she had worn at supper was now in a vase on the centre table.

"You are so odd, Ferdinand," began the lady. "Please put that revolver away, or I shall scream. What do you want to do? Shoot me? Of course, you could do that, but how explain matters to my servants or the American ambassador? Do you know him? He certainly is a dear. He came here to investigate me, and I really believe that had he been younger and not so great an official, he would have remained here—longer. At least, he gave me a wonderful recommendation. He sent me a copy of it, and I could see that he was shocked at the way people were talking about me. A lone woman must be very careful. In fact, she must be above suspicion, and when I told the ambassador my story and showed him my guest book, why, the only thing for him to do was to think that these dear boys had accidentally driven their cars over one of our precipices."

"I came here some years ago and bought this castle. I spent a large sum in making it suitable as a residence for the best kind of people. Of course, I hoped that now and then I should have company; so I prepared a series of guest chambers. There were any number of old four-poster beds, and I had these put into the new guest rooms and, at last, I began to be known, just a little; people in Paris and Moscow and New York began to whisper about this castle, and finally a man called from Moscow. He was a nervous fellow, always putting things in his mouth. One day we were walking through the forest and we saw some red seeds on the ground, near the skeleton of a horse. They looked exactly like pomegranate seeds. This Russian nobleman put some in his mouth and that night he became unconscious. Of course, I was worried, because I was sure that his friends would think that I had poisoned him. After some weeks of unconsciousness, he died. I went back to the forest and picked up all of the seeds that were scattered around, and I brought them back and planted some, and they would not germinate. The more I worried, the worse I felt, and just when it seemed that I could not bear the suspense any longer, a man by the name of

Southward from an American town, called Atlanta, came to see me. He had heard of me in Paris. I was young then, and I thoughtlessly told him about the Russian and asked him to help me unravel the mystery. He was a doctor, this American, and he asked me to let him see the seeds. I showed them to him and he examined them. He cut one open and looked at it through a pocket microscope, and finally he said that it was just a hard seed, and he said that it was like a pomegranate, and that it was not the cause of the Russian's death, because it would never be dissolved in his stomach—it was too hard; and he thought the man died of a disease he called uremia. I cried and told him how relieved I was to know all this, and could he prove it to me—if he could, he would win my everlasting gratitude. What did he do but at once put a seed in his mouth and swallow it! And he became unconscious and died—just like the Russian. And that made two.

"The affair shadowed my life. It made me broody, introspective. I was no longer the gay girl that had come so buoyantly to this castle in search of adventure.

"And then the blossoms came, and of all the things in my life that I have had, those wonderful blossoms were the most precious. You saw me wear one to-night at supper. At present, it is on the table. When I have one, I am a different woman—without one, I am sad, depressed and aged. So now I had two things to live for, one to solve the mystery of the seeds and the other to have a plentiful supply of blossoms.

"James Garey was the first man who acted in the least bit unfriendly. I knew that you were going to come, and I knew that he would accuse me of the death of his brother. Naturally, I was prepared; yet I determined to be honest with him and tell him the whole story. He decided to kill me, but at the last he said he would give me a gambler's chance. He had the idea that the red seeds had killed his brother. I showed him a bottle full, and, at the same time, allowed him to compare them with real seeds of the pomegranate. He said there was a little difference; so we put a red seed and a pomegranate seed on the card table and cut for the low card. The high card allowed the fortunate one to swallow the pomegranate seed, while the one who cut low was

to swallow the seed that he felt was so poisonous. I cut low; so I swallowed the red seed and he took the harmless seed, and in a few hours he was silent in the embrace of the slowly approaching death. You notice I am still alive? So, something else killed Garey? What?"

The Duke smiled. "Perhaps. Or, at the last moment, you switched the seeds on him."

"No. He was fortunate. He won out in the cards. Do you know, he followed me around as long as he could walk, and, of course, waited to see me become a hopeless cripple, and you should have seen the look of hopeless terror on his face when he found out that he could not walk or talk. He gambled with death and lost."

"So, one and all, those brave boys are dead?"

"No. Garey is still alive, and one or two others, but the rest are really dead."

"Lady Helen Moyennes. You are a liar! If I thought that you were telling the truth, I would kill you right there. I would fill that lovely body full of bullet holes. But you are trying to deceive me. You are either insane or a great actress. I should not be surprised to have the door open and all these former lovers of yours walk in as the animals did at Circe's banquet. Such a tale as you tell! For children or fools."

"I am not a liar. Here is a bottle filled with seeds, and—why, there is one of the flowers!"

"The flowers?" asked the Duke. "What in the name of the holy saints has the flower to do with the seed?"

"The seed finally matures the flower and the bloom is what I live for."

"But—I do not understand?"

"You will when you see the men. Come with me. Suppose we see James Garey first. He will have his eyes open, but he is really unconscious; at least, it is best to think so."

The lady led the Spaniard into a guest room. Passing down the hall, he recognized at least one fact, that he was passing by the door of his own room. Then they entered the next room. Fool that he was! Had Garey been separated by only a wall from help all the time since the Duke had arrived?

They entered the room, and the Duke saw that in practically every detail it was furnished like his own. And Garey was on the bed.

His eyes were open. He was in pyjamas, and but slightly covered with a white silk sheet. On his face was a puzzled look. Without looking at the woman by his side, the Duke took the sick man's hand. It was warm. The man was breathing, but the arm, when released, dropped flaccid on the bed.

"Garey! Garey! Don't you know me?" the Duke pleaded.

The soul seemed to answer in Garey's eyes. The soul, and nothing else.

The Duke's finger nervously touched the trigger of the revolver.

"Don't shoot me yet," jeered the tigress. "Wait till you have seen the rest of them. Let us go into the other rooms."

In the next room another man lay on the bed in the same paralysed attitude.

The lady said in a low voice, "This is a South American. I was so disgusted with him that, in some way, he swallowed a seed with his salad. He has lost a good many pounds in the last week. If I were not sure of his loss of sensibility, I should think from his expression that he was in pain."

In the next room the woman paused to turn on the electric lights. "If you look at this man closely, you will see that he also is still alive but not doing very well. See the little green tendrils coming out of his mouth and nose? The root formation has now reached a point at which the plant is able to reach the surface. Naturally there is a profound disturbance of all of the vital organs.

"Let us go into the next room. A lovely boy, Serriano of Boston, is there. A Greek god he was when he came here, and I would have saved him if I could, but he was so stubborn. Let's pass through this connecting door. See how thin his face is and shrunken his arms? But the plant is growing rampant. It is sending up its branches over the bed-posts and down over the floor. See the little buds? In another two weeks the blossoms will appear. I am sure that Serriano has

been dead for some days. I loved that boy, and I am so glad that he did not suffer.

"In this next room is the reason for your being here. Yes, you have guessed it—the brother of Garey. A surprise awaits you. Come through this door. Do you notice this odour? Have you ever had an experience like this? The most wonderful orchid in all the world, my passion flower."

On the bed in this room was what had once been a man. Now he seemed little more than a bag of skin and bones, but the room was filled with rustling, swaying vines, and a dozen flowers, like those the tigress had worn on her corsage, filled the room with a cloying fragrance that was almost unearthly and unendurable. The Lady Helen took one by the stem and held it near her bosom, and at once the pistils began tenderly to brush the skin.

She laughed. "See? My darlings know me. How glad they are to have me near! The others are disappointed, jealous. They want to love me, too."

"So that is Garey's brother?" the Duke asked slowly.

"Yes. He was a fine man. So far, he has produced more blossoms than any I have ever had. But let us see the others. Suppose we skip two or three rooms and go to the last room? That will give you an idea of the end, and I know you will agree with me that it is not so bad, not so very bad."

This last room was furnished like the others, but the plant was dead. The thing that had been a man was now dried leather, cracked and broken. Between the cracks could be seen the dead, dried roots that had eaten him, till nothing remained; and these had then died of hunger. On the bed-posts, over the floor, the dead leaves lay in dry rot. But the seed pods hung, a plentiful harvest, from the end of many a stem.

"Here we reap the harvest. This is the man from Moscow. To-morrow I will come with my glass bottle and save every seed and have the room clean and precise for the next visitor."

"There will be no to-morrow and no more visitors!"

"So, this is the end?"

"Precisely!"

"Then let me go and gather some of the flowers from Garey—for my funeral."

They returned to the room where the massive blooms filled the air with the odour of ethereal decay. Gently the lady broke off half a dozen, but, in spite of her care, the torn stems bled and covered her white *négligée* with blood. She pressed the bouquet to her face, and the Duke shuddered as he saw dozens of long twitching stamens caress her cheeks and eyelids.

"Now we will go back to any of your rooms," commanded the Duke, "and you can prepare to join Garey."

"At least, it will be a pleasure to die at the hands of such a gentleman. I am sure that it will give you a thrill to kill a defenceless woman."

"It will give me a great joy."

Still smelling the flowers, she sauntered to the card room.

Seated at one chair, she begged the Duke to occupy the other. The card table was between them.

"So, you are going to kill me?"

"No. On second thought, I am going to tie you up and take you in my car to Madrid, and there I am going to turn you over to the authorities."

"They will never believe you."

"They can come and see for themselves."

"By that time my servants will have all the rooms clean and fresh. Ferdinand, you are a fool. You know you cannot make the people in Madrid believe you. You had better kill me here. Of course, you cannot get out of the castle alive. Right now a half-dozen guns are pointed at your heart. Why not be a sport? Let's compromise. You write a letter to the American ambassador that you and James Garey are leaving for Nice and that you know everything is all right here. Then we will play a game of cards. If I lose, I will take one of my own seeds and you a pomegranate. I have one of those fruits here. I will let you cut it open and satisfy yourself that there is no fraud. I will call in my men and tell them that, if you win, they are to give you safe passage. I understand you are a gambler—let's try fate. Select your own game."

"I will do that little thing," said the Duke, smiling, as he reached in his pocket for the three walnut shells. "Let me cut the pomegranate. I want to look at those seeds. Put one

of your seeds beside it. God! They are alike. Now, call your men and tell them your orders, and we will begin."

The lady clapped her hands, and from behind the velvet curtains stepped six men. She had not lied. She told these six that she and the Duke were playing for high stakes, and if she lost they were to let the man go free. She called for pen and ink and paper and had the Duke write to the American ambassador about the trip to Nice. Then she told the six men that they could leave the room.

"You will learn in eight hours who won," she told them, "but if this guest wins, let him go free. If I win, we will have you take the letter to Madrid. Now, Ferdinand, explain this new American game."

"I have here three half walnut shells," began the Duke. "I will use a pomegranate seed. I will give you three chances to tell under which shell I put the seed. Best two out of three wins. If I win, I eat a pomegranate seed, and you one of those seeds of death. If you win, the tables will be reversed. I warn you that the hand is quicker than the eye."

"I will have some wine brought," commented the Lady Helen. "We will need something to wash the seeds down. My mouth is dry already. Is it not queer, fantastic, that I cannot stand excitement? Feel my hand, how it shakes."

"I do not care to feel your hand."

"A few hours ago you said that you loved me."

"I love you as I do death. Come. Be a sport. Do you understand the rules? Good! Now watch me closely as I wave my hand over the shell. There! It is now under one. Which one? The right end? Wrong. It was in the oentre. Now again. Watch me. This is your life at stake. Now, which one? The centre? Wrong again. It was on the left side. You have lost twice and you pay. Now is the time for my gun. Here is the glass of wine. Take a seed out of that bottle and swallow it. One false move and I blow your brains out. Now I will dig out one of the pomegranate seeds and drink it down with wine. Now we each have a seed. I understood you to say that it worked in eight hours? So, we will sit here till morning. If you move, I will kill you, anyway. I am not going to leave you till I know that you have started the long road that those brave young fools

took. You had a good time, but now your time has come to an end."

Sighing, the lady put down her glass.

"So, this is the end?" she said. "Well, have you any objection to my playing solitaire? Some men would have liked to hold me in their arms these last eight hours of life, but you are so different, Ferdinand. At times you seem to be unnecessarily cold. It is better to die than to live a lifetime with you. You would not satisfy."

She started to play solitaire. Hour after hour she shuffled and dealt. Four hours passed and then five and six. She had not spoken, but the Duke noticed that her movements were gradually becoming slower, and at times she swayed in her chair as though she were drunk.

At last his curiosity overcame him. "Do you feel sick?" he asked.

"I feel very peculiar. I think that soon I shall be unable to play."

He watched her carefully. Seven and a half hours passed and she just sat there motionless, looking at him with glazed eyes. Sighing and tired, he took his revolver and placed it in his pocket; then folding his hands on the table, he waited for the end.

He judged that the eight hours were up and started to look at his watch; but his hands stayed folded on the table. He tried to get up, and he just sat there.

Then the woman stretched; like a lazy cat she stretched her long, bare arms above her head and yawned.

"It has been a long, tiresome night, Ferdinand," she said. "You look sleepy yourself. That was an interesting game you played. Your idea that the hand was quicker than the eye is right. You never did see me plant those seeds in a pomegranate or palm a harmless seed so that it looked as though I took one from the glass bottle."

The Duke looked at her with smouldering hate, the fire of hell in his eyes, but he was helpless. The virus from the seed of death had already prostrated his nervous system and he was started on the long road that the other brave men had taken.

The tigress clapped her hands, and in walked the butler

and the valet. Without a word, they took the Duke and carried him to his bed. On that bed he was destined to lie till his body turned to bones, skin and dust. Then the woman clapped her hands again, and, when another servant came, she gave him the letter to the American ambassador, with orders to mail it. Then she went to her bedroom, talking softly to herself.

"I am tired," she said, "and slightly nauseated. I do not seem to stand excitement as well as I did once. Well. That makes one more fool. I wonder when I can stop. Certainly not so long as I gain such wonderful delight from my darling blossoms."

The sunlight was streaming through her bedroom windows. Slowly she undressed, and, with her six orchids in her hand, she sank luxuriously into the downy softness of her bed. She placed the blossoms on her shoulders, neck and face, and, quivering, shut her eyes.

The flowers awakened, and stretching forth their tremulous pistils and stamens, stroked her skin.

With a convulsive effort she gathered them to her lips and kissed them till she slept.

## Passing of a God

HENRY S. WHITEHEAD

"You say that when Carswell came into your hospital over in Port au Prince his fingers looked as though they had been wound with string," said I, encouragingly.

"It is a very ugly story, that, Canevin," replied Doctor Pelletier, still reluctant, it appeared.

"You promised to tell me," I threw in.

"I know it, Canevin," admitted Doctor Pelletier of the U.S. Navy Medical Corps, now stationed here in the Virgin Islands. "But," he proceeded, "you couldn't use this story, anyhow. There are editorial *tabus*, aren't there? The thing is too—what shall I say?—too outrageous, too incredible."

"Yes," I admitted in turn, "there are *tabus*, plenty of them. Still, after hearing about those fingers, as though wound with string—why not give me the story, Pelletier; leave it to me whether or not I 'use' it. It's the story I want, mostly. I'm burning up for it!"

"I suppose it's your look-out," said my guest. "If you find it too gruesome for you, tell me and I'll quit."

I plucked up hope once more. I had been trying for this story, after getting little scraps of it which allured and intrigued me for weeks.

"Start in," I ventured, soothingly, pushing the silver swizzel-jug after the humidor of cigarettes from which Pelletier was even now making a selection. Pelletier helped himself to the swizzel frowningly. Evidently he was torn between the desire to pour out the story of Arthur Carswell and some complication of feelings against doing so. I sat back in my wicker lounge-chair and waited.

Pelletier moved his large bulk about in his chair. Plainly now he was cogitating how to open the tale. He began, meditatively:

"I don't know as I ever heard public discussion of the

malignant bodily growths except among medical people. Science knows little about them. The fact of such diseases, though, is well known to everybody, through campaigns of prevention, the life insurance companies, appeals for funds—

"Well, Carswell's case, primarily, is one of those cases."

He paused and gazed into the glowing end of his cigarette.

"'Primarily?'" I threw in encouragingly.

"Yes. Speaking as a surgeon, that's where this thing begins, I suppose."

I kept still, waiting.

"Have you read Seabrook's book, 'The Magic Island', Canevin?" asked Pelletier suddenly.

"Yes," I answered. "What about it?"

"Then I suppose that from your own experience knocking around the West Indies and your study of it all, a good bit of that stuff of Seabrook's is familiar to you, isn't it—the *vodu*, and the hill customs, and all the rest of it, especially over in Haiti—you could check up on a writer like Seabrook, couldn't you, more or less?"

"Yes," said I, "practically all of it was an old story to me—a very fine piece of work, however, the thing clicks all the way through—an honest and thorough piece of investigation."

"Anything in it new to you?"

"Yes—Seabrook's statement that there was an exchange of personalities between the sacrificial goat—at the 'baptism'—and the young black girl, the chapter he calls: 'Girl-Cry—Goat-Cry'. That, at least, was a new one on me, I admit."

"You will recall, if you read it carefully, that he attributed that phenomenon to his own personal 'slant' on the thing. Isn't that the case, Canevin?"

"Yes," I agreed, "I think that is the way he put it."

"Then," resumed Doctor Pelletier, "I take it that all that material of his—I notice that there have been a lot of story-writers using his terms lately!—is sufficiently familiar to you so that you have some clear idea of the Haitian-African demi-gods, like Ogoun Badagris, Damballa, and the others, taking up their residence for a short time in some devotee?"

"The idea is very well understood," said I. "Mr. Seabrook mentions it among a number of other local phenomena. It

was an old negro who came up to him while he was eating, thrust his soiled hands into the dishes of food, surprised him considerably—then was surrounded by worshippers who took him to the nearest *houmfort* or *vodu*-house, let him sit on the altar, brought him food, hung all their jewellery on him, worshipped him for the time being; then, characteristically, quite utterly ignored the original old fellow after the 'possession' on the part of the 'deity' ceased and reduced him to an unimportant old pantaloons as he was before."

"That summarizes it exactly," agreed Doctor Pelletier. "That, Canevin, that kind of thing, I mean, is the real starting-place of this dreadful matter of Arthur Carswell."

"You mean—?" I barged out at Pelletier, vastly intrigued. I had had no idea that there was *vodu* mixed in with the case.

"I mean that Arthur Carswell's first intimation that there was anything pressingly wrong with him was just such a 'possession' as the one you have recounted."

"But—but," I protested, "I had supposed—I had every reason to believe, that it was a surgical matter! Why, you just objected to telling about it on the ground that—"

"Precisely," said Doctor Pelletier, calmly. "It was such a surgical case, but, as I say, it *began* in much the same way as the 'occupation' of that old negro's body by Ogoun Bâdagris or whichever one of their devilish deities that happened to be, just as, you say, is well known to fellows like yourself who go in for such things, and just as Seabrook recorded it."

"Well," said I, "you go ahead in your own way, Pelletier. I'll do my best to listen. Do you mind an occasional question?"

"Not in the least," said Doctor Pelletier considerately, shifted himself to a still more pronouncedly recumbent position in my Chinese rattan lounge-chair, lit a fresh cigarette, and proceeded:

"Carswell had worked up a considerable intimacy with the snake-worship of interior Haiti, all the sort of thing familiar to you; the sort of thing set out, probably for the first time in English at least, in Seabrook's book; all the gatherings, and the 'baptism', and the sacrifices of the fowls and the bull,

and the goats; the orgies of the worshippers, the boom and thrill of the *rata* drums—all that strange, incomprehensible, rather silly-surfaced, deadly-underneathed worship of ‘the Snake’ which the Dahomeyans brought with them to old Hispaniola, now Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

‘He had been there, as you may have heard, for a number of years; went there in the first place because everybody thought he was a kind of failure at home; made a good living, too, in a way nobody but an original-minded fellow like him would have thought of—shot ducks on the Léogane marshes, dried them, and exported them to New York and San Francisco to the United States’ two largest Chinatowns!

‘For a ‘failure’, too, Carswell was a particularly smart-looking chap, smart, I mean, in the English sense of that word. He was one of those fellows who was always shaved, clean, freshly-groomed, even under the rather adverse conditions of his living, there in Léogane by the salt marshes; and of his trade, which was to kill and dry ducks. A fellow can get pretty careless and let himself go at that sort of thing, away from ‘home’; away, too, from such niceties as there are in a place like Port au Prince.

‘He looked, in fact, like a fellow just off somebody’s yacht the first time I saw him, there in the hospital in Port au Prince, and that, too, was right after a rather singular experience which would have unnerved or unsettled pretty nearly anybody.

‘But not so old Carswell. No, indeed. I speak of him as ‘Old Carswell’, Canevin. That, though, is a kind of affectionate term. He was somewhere about forty-five then; it was two years ago, you see, and, in addition to his being very spick and span, well-groomed, you know, he looked surprisingly young, somehow. One of those faces which showed experience, but, along with the experience, a philosophy. The lines in his face were *good* lines, if you get what I mean—lines of humour and courage; no dissipation, no let-down kind of lines, nothing of slackness such as you would see in the face of even a comparatively young beach-comber. No, as he strode into my office, almost jauntily, there in the hospital, there was nothing, nothing whatever, about him, to suggest anything else but a prosperous fellow American, a professional chap, for

choice, who might, as I say, have just come ashore from somebody's yacht.

"And yet—good God, Canevin, the story that came out—!"

Naval surgeon though he was, with service in Haiti, at sea, in Nicaragua, and the China Station to his credit, Doctor Pelletier rose at this point, and, almost agitatedly, walked up and down my gallery. Then he sat down and lit a fresh cigarette.

"There is," he said, reflectively, and as though weighing his words carefully, "there is, Canevin, among various others, a somewhat 'wild' theory that somebody put forward several years ago, about the origin of malignant tumours. It never gained very much approval among the medical profession, but it has, at least, the merit of originality, and—it was new. Because of those facts, it had a certain amount of currency, and there are those, in and out of medicine, who still believe in it. It is that there are certain *nuclei*, certain masses, so to speak, of the bodily material which have persisted—not generally, you understand, but in certain cases—among certain persons, the kind who are 'susceptible' to this horrible disease, which, in the pre-natal state, did not develop fully or normally—little places in the bodily structure, that is—if I make myself clear?—which remain undeveloped.

"Something, according to this hypothesis, something like a sudden jar, or a bruise, a kick, a blow with the fist, the result of a fall, or what not, causes traumatism—physical injury, that is, you know—to one of the focus-places, and the undeveloped little mass of material *starts in to grow*, and so displaces the normal tissue which surrounds it.

"One objection to the theory is that there are at least two varieties, well-known and recognized scientifically; the carcinoma, which is itself sub-divided into two kinds, the hard and the soft carcinomæ, and the sarcoma, which is a soft thing, like what is popularly understood by a 'tumour'. Of course, they are all 'tumours', particular kinds of tumours, malignant tumours. What lends a certain credibility to the theory I have just mentioned is the malignancy, the growing element. For, whatever the underlying reason, they grow, Canevin, as is well recognized, and this explanation I have been talking

about gives a reason for the growth. The 'malignancy' is, really, that one of the things seems to have, as it were, its own life. All this, probably, you know?"

I nodded. I did not wish to interrupt. I could see that this side-issue on a scientific by-path must have something to do with the story of Carswell.

"Now," resumed Pelletier, "notice this fact, Canevin. Let me put it in the form of a question like this: To what kind, or type, of *vodu* worshipper, does the 'possession' by one of their deities occur—from your own knowledge of such things, what would you say?"

"To the incomplete; the abnormal, to an *old* man, or woman," said I, slowly, reflecting, "or—to a child, or, perhaps, to an idiot. Idiots, ancient crones, backward children, 'town-fools' and the like, all over Europe, are supposed to be in some mysterious way *en rapport* with deity—or with Satan! It is an established peasant belief. Even among the Mahometans, the moron or idiot is 'the afflicted of God'. There is no other better established belief along such lines of thought."

"Precisely!" exclaimed Pelletier, "and, Canevin, go back once more to Seabrook's instance that we spoke about. What type of person was 'possessed'?"

"An old doddering man," said I, "one well gone in his dotage apparently."

"Right once more! Note now, two things. First, I will admit to you, Canevin, that that theory I have just been expounding never made much of a hit with me. It might be true, but—very few first-rate men in our profession thought much of it, and I followed that negative lead and didn't think much of it, or, indeed, much about it. I put it down to the vapourings of the theorist who first thought it out and published it, and let it go at that. Now, Canevin, *I am convinced that it is true!* The second thing, then: When Carswell came into my office in the hospital over there in Port au Prince, the first thing I noticed about him—I had never seen him before, you see—was a peculiar, almost an indescribable, discrepancy. It was between his general appearance of weather-worn cleanliness, general fitness, his 'sinart' appearance in his clothes—all that, which fitted together about the clean-cut, open

character of the fellow; and what I can only describe as a pursiness. He seemed in good condition, I mean to say, and yet—there was something, somehow, *flabby* somewhere in his make-up. I couldn't put my finger on it, but—it was there, a suggestion of something that detracted from the impression he gave as being an upstanding fellow, a good-fellow-to-have-beside-you-in-a-pinch—that kind of person.

"The second thing I noticed, it was just after he had taken a chair beside my desk, was his fingers, and thumbs. They were swollen, Canevin, looked sore, as though they had been wound with string. That was the first thing I thought of, being wound with string. He saw me looking at them, held them out to me abruptly, laid them side by side—his hands, I mean—on my desk, and smiled at me.

"'I see you have noticed them, Doctor,' he remarked, almost jovially. 'That makes it a little easier for me to tell you what I'm here for. It's—well, you might put it down as a "symptom".'

'I looked at his fingers and thumbs; every one of them was affected in the same way; and ended up with putting a magnifying-glass over them.

'They were all bruised and reddened, and here and there on several of them, the skin was abraded, broken, *circularly*—it was a most curious-looking set of digits. My new patient was addressing me again :

"'I'm not here to ask you riddles, Doctor,' he said, gravely this time, 'but—would you care to make a guess at what did that to those fingers and thumbs of mine?'

"'Well,' I came back at him, 'without knowing what's happened, it *looks* as if you'd been trying to wear about a hundred rings, all at one time, and most of them didn't fit!'

"Carswell nodded his head at me. 'Score one for the medico,' said he, and laughed. 'Even numerically you're almost on the dot, sir. The precise number was one hundred and six!'

"I confess I stared at him then. But he wasn't fooling. It was a cold, sober, serious fact that he was stating; only, he saw that it had a humorous side, and that intrigued him, as anything humorous always did, I found out after I got to know Carswell a lot better than I did then."

"You said you wouldn't mind a few questions, Pelletier," I interjected.

"Fire away," said Pelletier. "Do you see any light, so far?"

"I was naturally figuring along with you, as you told about it all," said I. "Do I infer correctly that Carswell, having lived there—how long, four or five years or so?—"

"Seven, to be exact," put in Pelletier.

"—that Carswell, being pretty familiar with the native doings, had mixed into things, got the confidence of his black neighbours in and around Léogane, become somewhat 'adept', had the run of the *houmforts*, so to speak—'*votre bougie, M'sieu'*—the fortune-telling at the festivals, and so forth, and —had been 'visited' by one of the black deities? That, apparently, if I'm any judge of tendencies, is what your account seems to be leading up to. Those bruised fingers—the one hundred and six rings—good heavens, man, is it really possible?"

"Carswell told me all about that end of it, a little later—yes, that was, precisely, what happened, but—that, surprising, incredible as it seems, is only the small end of it all. You just wait—"

"Go ahead," said I. "I am all ears, I assure you!"

"Well, Carswell took his hands off the desk after I had looked at them through my magnifying-glass, and then waved one of them at me in a kind of deprecating gesture.

"I'll go into all that if you're interested to hear about it, Doctor," he assured me, 'but that isn't what I'm here about.' His face grew suddenly very grave. 'Have you plenty of time?' he asked. 'I don't want to let my case interfere with anything.'

"Fire ahead," says I, and he leaned forward in his chair.

"Doctor," says he, 'I don't know whether or not you ever heard of me before. My name's Carswell, and I live over Léogane way. I'm an American, like yourself, as you can probably see, and, even after seven years of it, out there, duck-hunting, mostly, with virtually no White-man's doings for a pretty long time, I haven't "gone native" or anything of the sort. I wouldn't want you to think I'm one of those

wasters.' He looked up at me inquiringly for my estimate of him. He had been by himself a good deal; perhaps too much. I nodded at him. He looked me in the eye, squarely, and nodded back. 'I guess we understand each other,' he said. Then he went on.

"Seven years ago, it was, I came down here. I've lived over there ever since. What few people know about me regard me as a kind of failure, I dare say. But—Doctor, there was a reason for that, a pretty definite reason. I won't go into it beyond your end of it—the medical end, I mean. I came down because of this.'

"He stood up then, and I saw what made that 'discrepancy' I spoke about, that 'flabbiness' which went so ill with the general cut of the man. He turned up the lower ends of his white drill jacket and put his hand a little to the left of the middle of his stomach. 'Just notice this,' he said, and stepped toward me.

"There, just over the left centre of that area, and extending up toward the spleen, on the left side, you know, there was a protuberance. Seen closely it was apparent that here was some sort of internal growth. It was that which had made him look flabby, stomachish.

"This was diagnosed for me in New York,' Carswell explained, 'a little more than seven years ago. They told me it was inoperable then. After seven years, probably, I dare say it's worse, if anything. To put the thing in a nutshell, Doctor, I had to "let go" then. I got out of a promising business, broke off my engagement, came here. I won't expatiate on it all, but—it was pretty tough, Doctor, pretty tough. I've lasted all right, so far. It hasn't troubled me—until just lately. That's why I drove in this afternoon, to see you, to see if anything could be done.'

"Has it been kicking up lately?" I asked him.

"Yes," said Carswell, simply. 'They said it would kill me, probably within a year or so, as it grew. It hasn't grown—much. I've lasted a little more than seven years, so far.'

"Come into the operating-room," I invited him, 'and take your clothes off, and let's get a good look at it.'

"Anything you say," returned Carswell, and followed me back into the operating-room then and there.

"I had a good look at Carswell first, superficially. That preliminary examination revealed a growth quite typical, the self-contained, not the 'fibrous' type, in the location I've already described, and about the size of an average man's head. It lay embedded, fairly deep. It was what we call 'encapsulated'. That, of course, is what had kept Carswell alive.

"Then we put the X-rays on it, fore and aft, and sideways. One of those things doesn't always respond very well to skiagraphic examination, to the X-ray, that is, but this one showed clearly enough. Inside it appeared a kind of dark, triangular mass, with the small end at the top. When Doctor Smithson and I had looked him over thoroughly, I asked Carswell whether or not he wanted to stay with us, to come into the hospital as a patient, for treatment.

"'I'm quite in your hands, Doctor,' he told me. 'I'll stay, or do whatever you want me to. But, first,' and for the first time he looked a trifle embarrassed, 'I think I'd better tell you the story that goes with my coming here! However, speaking plainly, do you think I have a chance?'

"'Well,' said I, 'speaking plainly, yes, there is a chance, maybe a "fifty-fifty" chance, maybe a little less. On the one hand this thing has been let alone for seven years since original diagnosis. It's probably less operable than it was when you were in New York. On the other hand, we know a lot more, not about these things, Mr. Carswell, but about surgical technique, than they did seven years ago. On the whole, I'd advise you to stay and get ready for an operation, and, say about "forty-sixty" you'll go back to Léogane, or back to New York if you feel like it, several pounds lighter in weight, and a new man. If it takes you, on the table, well, you've had a lot more time out there gunning for ducks in Léogane than those New York fellows allowed you.'

"'I'm with you,' said Carswell, and we assigned him a room, took his 'history', and began to get him ready for his operation.

"We did the operation two days later, at ten-thirty in the morning, and in the meantime Carswell told me his 'story' about it.

"It seems that he had made quite a place for himself, there in Léogane, among the negroes and the ducks. In seven years a man like Carswell, with his mental and dispositional equipment, can go quite a long way, anywhere. He had managed to make quite a good thing out of his duck-drying industry, employed five or six 'hands' in his little wooden 'factory', rebuilt a rather good house he had secured there for a song right after he had arrived, collected local antiques to add to the equipment he had brought along with him, made himself a real home of a peculiar, bachelor kind, and, above all, got in solid with the black people all round him. Almost incidentally I gathered from him—he had no gift of narrative, and I had to question him a great deal—he had got on to, and into, the know in the *vodu* thing. There wasn't, as far as I could get it, any aspect of it all that he hadn't been in on, except, that is, '*la chevre sans cornes*'—the goat without horns, you know—the human sacrifice on great occasions. In fact he strenuously denied that the *voduists* resorted to that; said it was a *canard* against them; that they never, really, did such things, never had, unless back in prehistoric times, in Guinea—Africa.

"But, there wasn't anything about it all that he hadn't at his very finger-ends, and at first-hand, too. The man was a walking encyclopædia of the native beliefs, customs, and practices. He knew, too, every turn and twist of their speech. He hadn't, as he had said at first, 'gone native' in the slightest degree, and yet, without lowering his White Man's dignity by a trifle, he had got it all.

"That brings us to the specific happening, the 'story' which, he had said, went along with his reason for coming in to the hospital in Port au Prince, to us.

"It appears that his sarcoma had never, practically, troubled. Beyond noting a very gradual increase in its size from year to year, he said, he 'wouldn't know he had one'. In other words, characteristically, it never gave him any pain or direct annoyance beyond the sense of the wretched thing being there, and increasing on him, and always drawing him closer to that end of life which the New York doctors had warned him about.

"Then, it had happened only three days before he came to

the hospital, he had gone suddenly unconscious one afternoon, as he was walking down his shell path to his gateway. The last thing he remembered then was being 'about four steps from the gate.' When he woke up it was dark. He was seated in a big chair on his own front gallery, and the first thing he noticed was that his fingers and thumbs were sore and ached very painfully. The next thing was that there were flares burning all along the edge of the gallery, and down in the front yard, and along the road outside the paling fence that divided his property from the road, and in the light of these flares there swarmed literally hundreds of negroes, gathered about him and mostly on their knees; lined along the gallery and on the grounds below it, prostrating themselves, chanting, putting earth and sand on their heads, and, when he leaned back in his chair, something hurt the back of his neck, and he found that he was being nearly choked with the necklaces, strings of beads, gold and silver coin-strings, and other kinds, that had been draped over his head. His fingers, and the thumbs as well, were covered with gold and silver rings, many of them jammed on so as to stop the circulation.

"From his knowledge of their beliefs, he recognized what had happened to him. He had, he figured, probably fainted, although such a thing was not at all common with him, going down the pathway to the yard gate, and the blacks had supposed him to be 'possessed' as he had several times seen black people, children, old men and women, morons, chiefly, similarly 'possessed'. He knew that, now that he was recovered from whatever had happened to him, the 'worship' ought to cease, and if he simply sat quiet and took what was coming to him, they would, as soon as they realized he was 'himself' once more, leave him alone and he would get some relief from this uncomfortable set of surroundings; get rid of the necklaces and the rings; get a little privacy.

"But—the queer part of it all was that they didn't quit. No, the mob around the house and on the gallery increased rather than diminished, and at last he was put to it, from sheer discomfort—he said he came to the point where he felt he couldn't stand it all another instant—to speak up and ask the people to leave him in peace.

"They left him, he says, at that, right off the bat, imme-

diately, without a protesting voice, but—and here was what started him on his major puzzlement—they didn't take off the necklaces and rings. No—they left the whole set of that metallic drapery which they had hung and thrust upon him right there, and, after he had been left alone, as he had requested, and had gone into his house, and lifted off the necklaces and worked the rings loose, the *next* thing that happened was that old Pa'p Josef, the local *papaloi*, together with three or four other neighbouring *papalois*, witch-doctors from nearby villages, and followed by a very old man who was known to Carswell as the *hougan*, or head witch-doctor of the whole countryside thereabouts, came in to him in a kind of procession, and knelt down all around him on the floor of his living-room, and laid down gourds of cream and bottles of red rum and cooked chickens, and even a big china bowl of Tannia soup—a dish he abominated, said it always tasted like soapy water to him!—and then backed out leaving him to these comestibles.

"He said that this sort of attention persisted in his case, right through the three days that he remained in his house in Léogane, before he started out for the hospital; would, apparently, be still going on if he hadn't come in to Port au Prince to us.

"But—his coming in was not, in the least, because of this. It had puzzled him a great deal, for there was nothing like it in his experience, nor, so far as he could gather from their attitude, in the experience of the people about him, of the *papalois*, or even of the *hougan* himself. They acted, in other words, precisely as though the 'deity' supposed to have taken up his abode within him had remained there, although there seemed no precedent for such an occurrence, and, so far as he knew, he felt precisely just as he had felt right along, that is, fully awake, and, certainly, not in anything like an abnormal condition, and, very positively, not in anything like a fainting fit!

"That is to say—he felt precisely the same as usual except that—he attributed it to the probability that he must have fallen on the ground that time when he lost consciousness going down the pathway to the gate (he had been told that passers-by had picked him up and carried him to the gallery

where he had awakened later, these Good Samaritans meanwhile recognizing that one of the 'deities' had indwelt him)—he felt the same except for recurrent, almost unbearable pains in the vicinity of his lower abdominal region.

"There was nothing surprising to him in this accession of the new painfulness. He had been warned that that would be the beginning of the end. It was in the rather faint hope that something might be done that he had come in to the hospital. It speaks volumes for the man's fortitude, for his strength of character, that he came in so cheerfully; acquiesced in what we suggested to him to do; remained with us, facing those comparatively slim chances with complete cheerfulness.

"For—we did not deceive Carswell—the chances were somewhat slim. 'Sixty-forty' I had said, but as I afterwards made clear to him, the favourable chances, as gleaned from the mortality tables, were a good deal less than that.

"He went to the table in a state of mind quite unchanged from his accustomed cheerfulness. He shook hands goodbye with Doctor Smithson and me, 'in case', and also with Doctor Jackson, who acted as anaesthetist.

"Carswell took an enormous amount of ether to get him off. His consciousness persisted longer, perhaps, than that of any surgical patient I can remember. At last, however, Doctor Jackson intimated to me that I might begin, and, Doctor Smithson standing by with the retracting forceps, I made the first incision. It was my intention, after careful study of the X-ray plates, to open it up from in front, in an up-and-down direction, establish drainage directly, and, leaving the wound in the sound tissue in front of it open, to attempt to get it healed up after removing its contents. Such is the technique of the major portion of successful operations.

"It was a comparatively simple matter to expose the outer wall. This accomplished, and after a few words of consultation with my colleague, I very carefully opened it. We recalled that the X-ray had shown, as I mentioned, a triangular-shaped mass within. This apparent content we attributed to some obscure chemical colouration of the con-

tents. I made my incisions with the greatest care and delicacy, of course. The critical part of the operation lay right at this point, and the greatest exactitude was indicated, of course.

"At last the outer coats of it were cut through and retracted, and with renewed caution I made the incision through the inmost wall of tissue. To my surprise, and to Doctor Smithson's, the inside was comparatively dry. The gauze which the nurse attending had caused to follow the path of the knife was hardly moistened. I ran my knife down below the original scope of that last incision, then upward from its upper extremity, greatly lengthening the incision as a whole, if you are following me.

"Then, reaching my gloved hand within this long up-and-down aperture, I felt about and at once discovered that I could get my fingers in around the inner containing wall quite easily. I reached and worked my fingers in farther and farther, finally getting both hands inside and at last feeling my fingers touch inside the posterior or rear wall. Rapidly, now, I ran the edges of my hands around inside, and, quite easily, lifted out the 'inside'. This, a mass weighing several pounds, of more or less solid material, was laid aside on the small table beside the operating-table, and, again pausing to consult with Doctor Smithson—the operation was going, you see, a lot better than either of us had dared to anticipate—and being encouraged by him to proceed to a radical step which we had not hoped to be able to take, I began the dissection from the surrounding, normal tissue, of the now collapsed walls. This, a long, difficult, and harassing job, was accomplished at the end of, perhaps, ten or twelve minutes of gruelling work, and the bag-like thing, now completely severed from the tissues in which it had been for so long embedded, was placed also on the side table.

"Doctor Jackson reporting favourably on our patient's condition under the anæsthetic, I now proceeded to dress the large aperture, and to close the body-wound. This was accomplished in a routine manner, and then, together, we bandaged Carswell, and he was taken back to his room to await awakening from the ether.

"Carswell disposed of, Doctor Jackson and Doctor Smithson left the operating-room, and the nurse started in cleaning up

after the operation; dropping the instruments into the boiler, and so on—a routine set of duties. As for me, I picked up the shell in a pair of forceps, turned it about under the strong electric operating-light, and laid it down again. It presented nothing of interest for a possible laboratory examination.

"Then I picked up the more or less solid contents which I had laid, very hastily, and without looking at it—you see, my actual removal of it had been done inside, in the dark for the most part and by the sense of feeling, with my hands, you will remember—I picked it up; I still had my operating-gloves on to prevent infection when looking over these specimens, and, still, not looking at it particularly, carried it out into the laboratory.

"Canevin"—Doctor Pelletier looked at me sombrely through the very gradually fading light of late afternoon, the period just before the abrupt falling of our tropic dusk—"Canevin," he repeated, "honestly, I don't know how to tell you! Listen, now, old man, do something for me, will you?"

"Why, yes—of course," said I, considerably mystified. "What is it you want me to do, Pelletier?"

"My car is out in front of the house. Come on home with me, up to my house, will you? Let's say I want to give you a cocktail! Anyhow, maybe you'll understand better when you are there, *I want to tell you the rest up at my house, not here.* Will you please come, Canevin?"

I looked at him closely. This seemed to me a very strange, an abrupt, request. Still, there was nothing whatever unreasonable about such a sudden whim on Pelletier's part.

"Why, yes, certainly I'll go with you, Pelletier, if you want me to."

"Come on, then," said Pelletier, and we started for his car.

The doctor drove himself, and after we had taken the first turn in the rather complicated route from my house to his, on the extreme airy top of Denmark Hill, he said, in a quiet voice:

"Put together, now, Canevin, certain points, if you please, in this story. Note, kindly, how the black people over in Léogane acted, according to Carswell's story. Note, too,

that theory I was telling you about; do you recollect it clearly?

"Yes," said I, still more mystified.

"Just keep those two points in mind, then," added Doctor Pelletier, and devoted himself to navigating sharp turns and plodding up two steep roadways for the rest of the drive to his house.

We went in and found his house-boy laying the table for his dinner. Doctor Pelletier is unmarried, keeps a hospitable bachelor establishment. He ordered cocktails, and the house-boy departed on this errand. Then he led me into a kind of office, littered with medical and surgical paraphernalia. He lifted some papers off a chair, motioned me into it, and took another near by. "Listen, now!" he said, and held up a finger at me.

"I took that thing, as I mentioned, into the laboratory," said he. "I carried it in my hand, with my gloves still on, as aforesaid. I laid it down on a table and turned on a powerful light over it. It was only then that I took a good look at it. It weighed several pounds at least, was about the bulk and heft of a full-grown coco-nut, and about the same colour as a hulled coco-nut, that is, a kind of medium brown. As I looked at it, I saw that it was, as the X-ray had indicated, vaguely triangular in shape. It lay over on one of its sides under that powerful light, and—Canevin, so help me God"—Doctor Pelletier leaned toward me, his face working, a great seriousness in his eyes—"it moved, Canevin," he murmured; "and, as I looked—the thing *breathed!* I was just plain dumbfounded. A biological specimen like that—does not move, Canevin! I shook all over, suddenly. I felt my hair prickle on the roots of my scalp. I felt chills go down my spine. Then I remembered that here I was, after an operation, in my own biological laboratory. I came close to the thing and propped it up, on what might be called its logical base, if you see what I mean, so that it stood as nearly upright as its triangular formation permitted.

"And then I saw that it had faint yellowish markings over the brown, and that what you might call its skin was moving, and—as I stared at the thing, Canevin—two things like little

arms began to move, and the top of it gave a kind of convulsive shudder, and it opened straight at me, Canevin, a pair of eyes, and looked me in the face.

"Those eyes—my God, Canevin, those eyes! They were eyes of something more than human, Canevin, something incredibly evil, something vastly odd, sophisticated, cold, immune from anything except pure evil, the eyes of something that had been worshipped, Canevin, from ages and ages out of a past that went back before all known human calculation, eyes that showed all the deliberate, lurking wickedness that has ever been in the world. The eyes closed, Canevin, and the thing sank over on to its side, and heaved and shuddered convulsively.

*"It was sick, Canevin;* and now, emboldened, holding myself together, repeating over and over to myself that I had a case of the quavers, of post-operative 'nerves', I forced myself to look closer, and as I did so I got from it a faint whiff of ether. Two tiny, ape-like nostrils, over a clamped-shut slit of a mouth, were exhaling and inhaling; drawing in the good, pure air, exhaling ether fumes. It popped into my head that Carswell had consumed a terrific amount of ether before he went under; we had commented on that, Doctor Jackson particularly. I put two and two together, Canevin, remembered we were in Haiti, where things are not like New York, or Boston, or Baltimore! Those negroes had believed that the 'deity' had not come out of Carswell, do you see? *That* was the thing that held the edge of my mind. The thing stirred uneasily, put out one of its 'arms', groped about, stiffened.

"I reached for a nearby specimen-jar, Canevin, reasoning almost blindly, that if this thing were susceptible to ether, it would be susceptible to—well, my gloves were still on my hands, and—now shuddering so that I could hardly move at all, I had to force every motion—I reached out and took hold of the thing—it felt like moist leather—and dropped it into the jar. Then I carried the carboy of preserving alcohol over to the table and poured it in till the ghastly thing was entirely covered, the alcohol near the top of the jar. It writhed once, then rolled over on its 'back' and lay still, the mouth now open. Do you believe me, Canevin?"

"I have always said that I would believe anything, on proper evidence," said I, slowly, "and I would be the last to question a statement of yours, Pelletier. However, although I have, as you say, looked into some of these things perhaps more than most, it seems, well——"

Doctor Pelletier said nothing. Then he slowly got up out of his chair. He stepped over to a wall-cupboard and returned, a wide-mouthed specimen-jar in his hand. He laid the jar down before me in silence.

I looked into it, through the slightly-discoloured alcohol with which the jar, tightly sealed with rubber tape and sealing-wax, was filled nearly to the brim. There, on the jar's bottom, lay such a thing as Pelletier had described (a thing which, if it had been "seated" upright, would somewhat have resembled that representation of the happy little godling "Billiken" which was popular twenty years ago as a desk ornament), a thing suggesting the sinister, the unearthly, even in this dessicated form. I looked long at the thing.

"Excuse me for even seeming to hesitate, Pelletier," said I, reflectively.

"I can't say that I blame you," returned the genial doctor. "It is, by the way, the first and only time I have ever tried to tell the story to anybody."

"And Carswell?" I asked. "I've been intrigued with that good fellow and his difficulties. How did he come out of it all?"

"He made a magnificent recovery from the operation," said Pelletier, "and afterwards, when he went back to Léogane, he told me that the negroes, while glad to see him quite as usual, had quite lost interest in him as the throne of a 'divinity'."

"H'm," I remarked, "it would seem, that, to bear out——"

"Yes," said Pelletier, "I have always regarded that fact as absolutely conclusive. Indeed, how otherwise could one possibly account for—*this?*" He indicated the contents of the laboratory jar.

I nodded my head in agreement with him. "I can only say that—if you won't feel insulted, Pelletier—that you are singularly open-minded, for a man of science! What, by the way, became of Carswell?"

The house-boy came in with a tray, and Pelletier and I drank to each other's good health.

"He came in to Port au Prince," replied Pelletier after he had done the honours. "He did not want to go back to the States, he said. The lady to whom he had been engaged had died a couple of years before; he felt that he would be out of touch with American business. The fact is—he had stayed out here too long, too continuously. But, he remains an 'authority' on Haitian native affairs, and is consulted by the High Commissioner. He knows, literally, more about Haiti than the Haitians themselves. I wish you might meet him; you'd have a lot in common."

"I'll hope to do that," said I, and rose to leave. The house-boy appeared at the door, smiling in my direction.

"The table is set for two, sar," said he.

Doctor Pelletier led the way into the dining-room, taking it for granted that I would remain and dine with him. We are informal in St. Thomas, about such matters. I telephoned home and sat down with him.

Pelletier suddenly laughed—he was half-way through his soup at the moment. I looked up inquiringly. He put down his soup-spoon and looked across the table at me.

"It's a bit odd," he remarked, "when you stop to think of it! There's one thing Carswell doesn't know about Haiti and what happens there!"

"What's that?" I inquired.

"That—thing—in there," said Pelletier, indicating the office with his thumb in the way artists and surgeons do. "I thought he'd had troubles enough without *that* on his mind too."

I nodded in agreement, and resumed my soup. Pelletier has a cook in a thousand. . . .

# Prince Borgia's Mass

AUGUST W. DERLETH

CESARE, the Prince Borgia, Duke of Valentinois and Romagna, Lord of Imola and Forli, of Rimini and Pesaro, of Faenza and Urbino, stretched forth his imperial hand and took from the lackey the paper he extended. At the same moment two figures moved out of the shadows behind the Borgia and peered over his shoulder at the paper. The younger of the two, he with the incipient moustache, nervously stroked the down on his sharp chin; the other, an older, grey-haired man in military costume, betrayed by nought save the narrowing of his eyes the intensity of his interest.

Cesare, the Prince Borgia, grunted suddenly. "Three more!" he exclaimed with sullen vehemence.

"Devil's work," muttered the military men.

"Three more," repeated the young man under his breath.

"Some action must be taken, Highness," said the military man in a jerky voice. "This thing cannot . . . must not continue."

"It is not fitting that you rebuke me thus, Captain," returned the Prince Borgia shortly. "Be assured; action has already been taken. This very night shall see the end of this satanic business." He turned abruptly to the lackey, who at once began to bow with the rapidity and regularity of an automaton. "Summon before me the mage, René!"

The lackey, still bowing, backed himself out of the spacious tent. The young man sank into a chair at the side of the Prince Borgia.

"What would you with René, Highness? Is it that you need magic now to combat this vandalism?"

Cesare, the Prince Borgia, turned his gaze on his companion. "Your mind is yet too young, Midi, to know this thing. Think you common vandals come to steal the bodies of my dead . . . such bodies already denuded of all things costly and of value? Pah!"

"It is good to think not, Highness. But if it is not vandals who do this thing, who then?"

The captain leaned forward. "You suspect, then, Highness? Shall we take them this night?"

"They shall die before the dawn!"

"That is well," said the captain. "Yes, that is well."

Cesare nodded.

The flap of the tent was drawn aside, and into the large, dimly-lit space shuffled the bent, wizened figure of René, the mage, and his grotesque, bird-like shadow followed behind, trailing the wall of the tent. He approached the Prince Borgia.

"Highness!" he murmured, and inclined his head.

"René, this night have three more bodies gone." Cesare paused for the full import of his words to reach the mage. In a moment he continued: "These, my men, have died an honourable death in battle, and it is fitting that an honourable burial be given them. But their bodies have been taken, and burial is not to be for them. Yet, you were set to watch them with a purpose. Have you accomplished that purpose, René?"

The mage bowed low. "My commission is fulfilled; it is as you had foreseen, Highness. If a body of retainers is summoned together, I shall guide Highness to the spot where the bodies have been taken. There Highness shall see and know the guilty, and shall devise for them fit punishment. Fourteen bodies now in all have gone; these three we can yet save from indignity."

"Well done, my worthy René; go now and array yourself for the journey." The Prince Borgia turned. "And you, Captain, give orders for picked men to be in readiness to accompany us within the hour."

The captain murmured, inclined his head, and left the tent, the crabbed figure of René trailing slowly in his wake.

A half-hour's hard riding brought the group of men to the base of a small knoll some distance from the camp, where René indicated that the Prince Borgia should give the signal to dismount. The Borgia relayed a curt order to his captain, and in a moment the body of men was creeping silently up the slope, René, with the Prince Borgia, Midi, and the captain

in the lead. Topping the rise, René turned and raised a hand to enjoin silence. Then he bent to the three around him.

"Recollect, Highness," he muttered in a low voice, "to-night is Walpurgis night; this night do all the demons of the earth, the air, the fire, and the water come together to serve through earthly men at the Black Mass. See there!" He crouched low, and pointed.

Before them, in a slight depression at the base of the knoll, there stood a grove of trees; in the midst of this grove could be discerned vague, black shadows, moving to and fro in the flickering light of huge candles. Midi gasped. The Prince Borgia gave the order for the men to surround the grove in silence; at his call they were to take those in the grove. Then the four, again led by the mage, crept forward, and came at last to a vantage-point, where they stood to watch the horrible ritual taking place before them. Midi, the young companion of Cesare, started forward, the better to see, but Cesare drew him softly back.

There were nine men in the grove, and each was robed in black from head to toe, and upon each face there was a grotesque mask. Their robes, the watchers could see, were decorated with furs. Midi turned a startled, puzzled face to René.

"Mockery, Messer," said the mage softly. "The furs of panther, lynx, and cat are worn always in these rituals. And those candles, Highness," he went on, turning now to the Prince Borgia, "those candles are made from the fat of corpses. See, too, how they are made, each in the form of an inverted cross. Their bowls are skulls, and their fires are fed with cypress branches, and with the wood of gibbets. Soon they will consecrate a black host before that huge inverted cross they have stolen somewhere."

The air was heavy with the stench of sulphur and evil-smelling asafetida. The watchers saw the nine in the grove walk upon an earth covered with triangles, columns, stars, pentagrams and all manner of cabalistic signs. Now one of the nine separated himself and strode forward alone, where, with incredible obscenities, he held aloft a black host, and at once there arose from the eight before him a low chant, a

calling upon Beelzebub and Ahriman, a pæan to Satan on high.

But the Prince Borgia was not inclined to grant the nine sufficient time to complete their rituals; for suddenly he gave a sharp command, and at once there came rushing from all sides the retainers, who threw themselves upon the black priests in fury. "Alive!" called Cesare. "I want them brought to me alive!" He turned and began to walk rapidly to where his horse was tethered. "Come," he said to the three with him, "I shall punish them to fit the crime; they shall celebrate with me a Mass of my own devising . . . and that their last!"

They rode swiftly back to the camp, where Cesare gave a quick order, rousing his troops from their sleep. At his order, too, men started to fashion nine inverted crosses, to set them in the ground when they were completed. Then he, with Midi and the mage, sat to await the coming of his retainers with the nine black priests.

They came at last, with the nine, a sorry group, stripped of their robes, securely bound. Cesare, the Prince Borgia, scrutinized them closely. Then he motioned for them to be brought forward and flung to their knees; again he studied the faces before him. He leaned forward to speak to them.

"Did you not know this the camp of the Borgia Prince, eh? . . . And yet you took from it the bodies of its dead! . . . Swine! Know that you are about to die; prepare to go before your black master." He motioned to the men. "Strip these of all clothing, and nail them upon the crosses . . . see to it that their heads do not touch upon the earth." He turned now to René. "Take with you their black hosts, and by your magic make them white."

The mage bowed and shambled away.

"Look you to it that upon each cross there is placed a portion of the tallow candles these swine have used," the Prince addressed his men. "These must be placed and lit so that each drop of hot wax strikes the faces of the men below; let it remind them of their eternity."

René appeared suddenly, in his hands nine of the white wafers which had been black only a moment before. These

he gave to Cesare, and stood aside to await the further orders of the Prince Borgia.

"To fight these carrion," murmured Cesare, "I can use either white or black magic . . . and it is my pleasure to use black. Think you not the black more fitting, René?"

"Highness knows best." The mage inclined his head. "Black, too, is the more dangerous."

"And the better then," said Cesare, and strode forward. "Come!"

Obediently René followed him. The Prince Borgia paused before the first of the nine, and with his own fingers forced into the man's mouth one of the unconsecrated white wafers. At the same moment René mumbled a short ritual in Latin. Cesare waited until the mage had finished; then he moved to the second, repeated his process, and the mage again said the ritual. Thus the nine were served. Now Cesare turned once more to the retainers.

"Bring to me the skull-bowls these carrion have used."

Two retainers moved forward with the bowls, which the mage took carefully in his hands. The Prince Borgia moved forward in his turn and dipped his hands into the fluid in the bowl; then he turned and began to sprinkle the bodies on the crosses with the fluid. This completed, he stepped away and gave the ritual into the charge of the mage.

René cast from him the skulls, so that they fell before the crosses, and more of the fluid splattered upward into the straining faces of the nine. Then he took from one of the retainers a black robe, which had been worn in the grove that night, and put it over his clothes. Now he fell to gesticulating and shouting, and at last, with incredible rapidity, began to repeat the entire ritual of the Black Mass backward, and at its conclusion pronounced in a loud voice the name of Beelzebub seven times.

Hardly had the sound of his voice died away when there came from the depths of the sky a dense black cloud resembling nothing so much as a mass of dull black velvet suspended in the air. This hovered for a moment above the crosses; then descended suddenly, and immediately the air became intolerable for the smell of sulphur saturating it. Instinctively the soldiers crowded back; but René held his

ground. For a moment the black cloud clung to the crosses, writhing and weaving about them; then suddenly there came a bluish pallor, and at once a brilliant flash of flame . . . and it was gone.

Then the startled soldiers saw that though the crosses remained as fresh as they had been made, the bodies of the nine were gone, and with them the skull-bowls, and the tallow candles—but below each cross there lay a tiny heap of ashes!

"My Mass is over," said Cesare, the Prince Borgia. "And I am very tired . . . And you, Midi? Come."

Together the two moved away, and behind them in silence came the crabbed, weary figure of the mage, René.

# Pussy

FLAVIA RICHARDSON

GODFREY ELLERTON picked up the little green figure of a cat that he had bought that afternoon in a shop close to the British Museum. It was a pretty little thing, hard and cold to the touch, made in some composition. The dealer who had sold it to him had been unable to name the material, and, in consequence, had been disposed to let it go for a comparatively small sum. Most buyers wanted bronze or ivory or authentic work from some locality.

Godfrey had bought it because he liked it, and because it would make a pleasant addition to the ornaments on his mantelpiece.

The door, which he had left slightly ajar, was pushed open a little farther. Simpkins, the black cat belonging to the housekeeper, came in, in his usual stately manner. He was well aware that the "third floor front" generally had crumpets for tea—and Simpkins's soul thrilled at the thought of butter.

"Hullo, old boy," said Godfrey carelessly. "Come and see what I've got. A little cousin of yours!"

Simpkins pursued his stately way round the table, put his paws on Godfrey's knee and jumped up. Then a strange thing took place. Simpkins sniffed at the little composition figure—once, twice, and then arched his back and spat violently. For a second longer he paused, then sprang to the floor in one long wild leap, and hid himself behind the corner cupboard.

"Well, that's funny," said Godfrey, half-aloud. "I didn't know you were as jealous as all that, Simpkins."

Getting to his feet he set the little cat well out of reach on the mantelpiece, and then bent down to coax the erring Simpkins.

It took him exactly eleven and a half minutes by his watch to persuade Simpkins to come out into the open, and even then the cat sidled round the outskirts of the room. When

he reached the fireplace he gave one leap across the hearthrug and subsided, trembling, under a chair.

Godfrey picked him up at last, and comforted him with thoughts of tea and crumpets, but he could feel the quick thudding of Simpkins's heart, and the instinctive bristling of his fur.

The crumpets were not much of a success that afternoon. It was patent to Godfrey that Simpkins was only staying in the room because he was too proud to run away, and because he was a creature of fixed habits. But he ate his portion of tea and lapped his milk with one ear cocked and his muscles tensed.

Presently Simpkins went away, and Godfrey settled down to read. He turned a few pages, then threw the book down, with a laugh.

"I wonder what upset old Simpkins so much," he said to himself.

The thought was sufficient to send him across to the fireplace. He took the little cat down from the mantelpiece and studied it closely. It seemed entirely ordinary. Not thinking much of what he was doing, Godfrey went back to his seat, still clutching the cat. He put it on the table at his elbow.

The shadows lengthened. The lamplighter came round the streets and touched the lamps to sudden life. The beams from one of them on the other side of the road touched Godfrey's window, and made a bar of molten gold on the floor. He switched on the reading-lamp, but did not trouble to rise and draw the curtains.

As he sat down his hand came into contact with the little cat. He drew it away sharply, and looked at his fingers. Puzzled, he stared again. He could have sworn that he had touched something soft and yet damp, furry yet with a trace of the sleekness of a seal.

He read a page or two, then, forced by some unconscious desire, put out his hand again and felt the little cat. It was quite cold and hard, just as he had expected.

Godfrey laughed and went on reading. About half an hour later he suddenly became aware that there was another presence in the room. He looked up, rather unnerved. The room was dark, save for the bar of lamplight on the floor and

the little circle of light cast by the shaded reading-lamp. Just outside that little circle were two pin-points of light—green light . . . like the eyes of a cat.

He muttered an oath, and, overcoming an extraordinary feeling of repulsion, caught up the cat. He studied it carefully, and then set it down again.

"A trick of the light," he muttered. "Must have caught some curious cross reflection. Funny effect."

He got up and drew the curtains across the windows, so that the golden bar was shut out. Now the room was quite dark but for the reading-lamp. As he went back to his chair Godfrey could not keep his eyes off the little cat. It seemed to have grown. It seemed to be smiling. The eyes were distinctly alight—green eyes—beastly—indescribably beastly. . . .

Godfrey felt rather sick. He held on to the chair while he rapidly thought over what he had eaten that day. Nothing that could have troubled his digestion so much. And there was the very odd behaviour of Simpkins an hour or so earlier. . . . He looked again.

The green cat had grown larger . . . and it had moved. It was now almost entirely inside the circle of light, and while this movement took some of the brightness away from its eyes, it emphasized the horror that was growing. As Godfrey looked, he became aware that the smooth back was ruffling, the eyes were dropping, hair was growing.

"Dear Heaven!" he muttered. "Am I mad?"

He dared not leave the room. The table stood between him and the door, and he was curiously aware that he would not be allowed to pass the cat. The knowledge that he was for the time being at any rate under the dominion of a stronger power than himself was disturbing, but at least it removed any necessity for active decision.

The cat was definitely growing larger. Now it was almost life-sized. But it did not stop. It went on growing steadily, with a terrible remorseless growth that emphasized its inevitability.

Still Godfrey stood and stared. He realized that the hand which was gripping the back of the chair was stiff and bruised with the pressure he had exerted. But he did not dare to leave

go. That homely, solid chair back was his one protection against madness, the one security he felt in a tottering world.

Then he became conscious of a new sound in the room—very faint and far away—the sound of a thin, sweet music—the music that comes from reed instruments. The high, thin notes came clearly through the air. The cat heard them too. It expanded again, and then it smiled.

The smile made Godfrey close his eyes. Then he opened them again because, horrible as it was to see the cat, it was more horrible to be shut out from what was going on.

The smile became so broad that the cat seemed to vanish.

"A Cheshire cat," Godfrey muttered to himself. "A Cheshire cat." The cat faded away and only the grin was left.

A grin. Surely one could combat a disembodied thing—a ludicrous thing like a grin with no face behind it? He shifted his grip on the chair-back and swung his weight slightly more forward.

But before he could move the music swelled and changed. There was a menacing note now behind the reeds, a note that held him with a strange, unknown fear. And yet he was aware that this was not unknown. There was something about it, æons old, that called to him, something that echoed faintly through the centuries and found its answer in his subconscious brain.

The cat had reappeared. It had grown larger. Soon it would have to leave the table. It was too big to accommodate itself in comfort.

Suddenly Godfrey knew that when the cat left the table his nerve would go. As long as it was perched there, it seemed to be isolated, on a different plane. But as soon as it descended, as soon as it left the ring of light, it would be something ineffably terrifying. As he looked, it moved, stretched one paw out delicately, and then another. And then it grinned again, and its eyes grew larger and more ancient.

The music swelled, died down and swelled again. A strange odour was creeping into the room. Restively, Godfrey became aware of it. Strange, yet reminiscent. New, yet entirely old. Stale, yet with the fresh sweetness of spices, of sunshine and the long hot days.

For a second his conscious mind refused to register. Then he knew the smell and grew still more afraid. It was the smell of incense and of the perfumes of the dead.

Words began to mingle with the music. Words in some long-dead tongue that he had never known. Yet their import began to convey itself to him through the brain and the long sleeping souls of years.

He tried to cry out for help, but he could not. He tried to tell himself that it was a dream, a nightmare, but he knew it was true.

He saw the great cat raise itself, arching its back, sweeping its tail, like some animal of the jungle that is aware that the prey is safely cornered. There was something revolting about its movements, something that subtly expressed its certainty, the complete absence of haste. What was written, was written.

The words grew clearer now and Godfrey felt that strange certainty that in a little while he would himself be able to join in the song. Registration was becoming clearer, he felt as if he were groping for the words of a half-forgotten hymn. . . .

The cat came to the edge of the table and looked up at him. Compelled by some power stronger than himself, Godfrey met its eyes.

The sight of them sent the blood coldly through his veins. In those green eyes was mirrored the terror of the ages, the ancient sin that never dies . . . the crime for which there is no atonement.

And he knew that he must be part and lot in that sin, enduring through the years as long as heaven and earth should endure—that for him there would be no return.

The music was louder now, almost deafening. Drums had been added to the reed instruments. They were beating out a song of triumph. The big cat purred and licked its chops, languorously, lustfully.

The power that had been Godfrey's will was slipping away. He knew now that the words of the hymn were ringing in his mind. In a moment he would open his lips and utter them . . . and from then there would be no hope.

The cat yawned and gathered itself together as if for a spring.

The room seemed to be full of voices. The hymn surged on to a triumphant roll of drums, and the words became

clearer. Godfrey could hear them now with his earthly ears as well as with his mind.

But one word still eluded him, and he tried to shut his mind and his memory, for until he could say that name of the cat he was safe.

Of a sudden, it seemed to grow angry, as though aware that his puny will was being pitted against the forces of the past. It drew itself up still further. . . . The sound of voices grew louder.

And then Godfrey knew the name of the cat, the name of fear, the name of dread, the name that was whispered in hushed tones in Thebes before the dawning of the Day. And the muscles of his throat tightened, and his eyes started forward in their sockets as he strove to control the overwhelming desire to say that word aloud.

Around him were the voices, jibing, commanding, luring . . .

The desire was overwhelming. The scent of the incense rose in his nostrils, he could scarcely stand for the cloying sweet faintness that overtook his senses . . . yet he stood firm.

Then the great cat sprang. As he felt its claws in his neck, felt the hot fetid breath upon his face, Godfrey knew a great sense of relief, in that the end had come but yet he had not spoken.

And as he lost consciousness he heard the snarls of the great beast, baulked of its final desire, and the cries of the people whom he could not see, rising in applause and honour of Pasht, who is Bubastis, who is the Sin of Egypt . . .

When they found him in the morning his face was very peaceful, though his throat had been marked with scratches that might have been made by a very large cat. Neither the doctor nor the landlady could understand them. . . .

But Simpkins, after nosing round the door with the utmost care, ran in and spat at a figure of a small green cat that was half-hidden by the body of Godfrey Ellerton.

# The Wonderful Tune

J. D. KERRUISH

It seemed such an innocent little thing when Larssen rehearsed the details. Besides, it was Magic; ergo, Bosh.

"What is the Huldra King's Tune?" asked Iris.

"It is the crowning piece of Huldra music; and there is a spell attached to it," said Larssen.

"As long as it is played in its entirety all present must dance to it," he further informed her. "Also the player cannot stop playing it—however he wishes to . . ."

Heaven knows he himself wished to stop playing it that night! I'd like to forget it myself—get that tune out of my head, and the sound of the beastly thuds, the disgusting pad, padding! If I set it out in words perhaps they may not come into my reluctant memory so often.

. . . . .  
This happened a good while ago, when it meant rough travelling if you wanted to get from Davos to Italy in winter. But I can only tell the tale now, by arrangement with Einar Larssen, because years have steeled Madame Larssen's nerves, and it will not upset her for life if she comes across this account and recognizes, behind the substitute names, what she missed in the Fasplana Inn.

A telegram summoned Mrs. Walsh and Iris to the bedside of a relative who was in extremis, for the tenth time in three years, in a North Italian health resort. Iris and I had only been engaged a week, so even strong-minded Mrs. Walsh had to stretch a point and let me escort them. We set off from Davos comfortably enough, and it was a matter of carriages until late afternoon.

Twilight shut down on us negotiating an uncommonly trying pass of the Rhaetic Alps. Snowflakes big as one's joined

thumbs coming down thick, the landscape blotted into unstarred greyness, only the ashy reflection of the nearer snow showing that we were on earth and not jolting over derelict worlds in an infinitude of blank space. At the Hospiz at the top of the pass we changed to a sledge and the driver removed all the horse bells before starting. The chime of them might start off some delicately poised mass of snow from the heights on top of us.

So, hushedly, we drove over a snow floor, coming at times on the top of a telegraph pole just over the surface, the wires making a slow *Æolian harping* level with our feet. The snow was falling its thickest when the accident occurred.

A bad spill over a buried obstruction. The women fell into the snow, I landed against a telegraph post and sustained all the casualties—a right wrist that began to swell and pain abominably and a left shoulder that appeared to be shrivelling and losing all feeling. The rest of the drive was nightmare, the wires playing the deuce's own melody, and myself almost light-headed before the flicker of lanterns came suddenly into view.

When my senses were really at my beck and call again we were in a big timber-built hall, a fire crackling in the chimney and an enormous number of Swiss of all ages and sizes acting sympathetic chorus while Iris and her mother attended to my injuries, aided by a slim young man with a mop of tow-coloured hair.

"Allow me to introduce myself, Monsieur, and then you will perhaps fulfil the formality, so beloved in your country, by introducing me to the ladies with whom I have had the pleasure of working for some time." Thus the yellow-haired man, when I was propped in a chair. His French was good, but not of France. "I am your fellow guest, forced to stay for the night through the blocking of the farther road. My wife is here also, but at present she is resting in her own apartment. And my name—I have no card on my person—is Einar Larssen."

We three started in unison—"The violinist?" exclaimed Iris, and he bowed and pushed back a straggling lock self-consciously.

I made the necessary introductions. The landlord interposed nervously, "It is perhaps advisable to inform the ladies—" he began. Larssen interrupted. I distinctly saw him bestow a warning frown on the man, and the Switzer's face expressed the comprehension of one who receives secret orders. "Our host would impress on you that the 'Four Chamois' has but little accommodation to offer at the best of times, Madame Walsh," the violinist said smoothly. "I hear Madame coming, she will arrange with you for a fair division."

Madame Larssen appeared now, a frail, pretty little woman in the early twenties, and hustled Mrs. Walsh and Iris off. I saw all the Swiss, the landlord and his wife, the several servants, and our driver exchange looks as the trio departed.

"It is most awkward, Monsieur Lambton," said Larssen, suddenly become businesslike. "Madame Larssen is of a nervous temperament, and for her sake we have been forced to a certain concealment and we might as well extend the concealment to Madame Walsh and Mademoiselle; they will rest the easier for not knowing about it."

I could not imagine what the fellow was driving at. Infectious disease? Robbers? "It is behind that door they rest, Monsieur," the landlord volunteered, indicating one at the side of the hall. "Three corpses."

"Most ladies are averse to such house-fellows," Larssen proceeded gently. "We will all be on our way in the morning; there is no need for them to know, eh?"

I agreed. "They will rest the easier for knowing nothing. Three corpses? Three at once?"

The landlord waxed voluble. They were the aftermath of an avalanche. There are several kinds of avalanche, and the nastiest is the dirt avalanche. It's like the tipping out of a titanic dustcart; a filthy tide of mud and shingle, slabbed together with half-melted snow, packed with the trees, turves, rubbish heaps, and corpses it has gathered in its course. The snow avalanche enfolds you dead in its chaste whiteness; the dirt variety pinches, chokes, and suffocates you slowly, then acts threshing-machine and steam-roller combined to the mortal part of you, until its force is spent and it settles with you interred somewhere in it.

Such an abomination had trickled its way down the valley

hard by the Inn of the Four Chamois early that winter, three men were lost in it, and that day diggers had found their remains. "Caspar Ragotli is entire," said mine host, with a nod at the door; "Melchoir Fischer—" He told us, detailedly, how this Melchoir was in pieces, most of them there, while of the third, Hans Buol, only one hand had been discovered, "But we know it for Buol's, by the open knife grasped in it," our entertainer proceeded, gloatingly. "A fine new knife from your Sheffield, Monsieur Lambton; and the hand being the right it sufficed for the whole, as the gentlemen will know—"

I felt thankful for Larssen's concealment when the ladies reappeared, prepared to make the best of things. We were merry enough over our mishap, now that food, fire, and four walls were our portion, with sounds of storm brushing up louder and louder without to add zest to enjoyment. The most awkward thing was that, with my injuries, I was limited to the stiff use of one hand alone and could scarcely lift that. I would stay up, if only to convince Iris there was nothing much the matter. If it had not been for my croaking I knew she would have been enjoying everything in this small adventure enormously, from the unexpected company to the robustious dog and severe cat who slipped in when a servant was sent to bring wood from the outhouse where they had been banished.

"But what makes them fidget round that door?" she asked innocently.

Larssen was behind her. Under fear of his eye the landlord answered composedly: "There is in that room a—a stock of meat, Madame."

Now came the son of the house with the bag of an afternoon's hunt: a pair of marmots to be stuffed against the next tourist season. He placed them on a chest by the lethal door while his father took him aside for a word of caution. We made the three, host, hostess and son, sup with us; and all was so comfortable that I forgot the other guests until Larssen whispered apologetically:

"It is not really disrespectful, Monsieur Lambton."

We kept shocking hours for a Swiss inn, the eight of us, after the tired servants had been packed off to their quarters.

"This is like home," said Larssen dreamily, when we were all basking round the fire. "I come from a farm—up in the wilds beyond Romsdal—and it was even so in the old hall. The big fire in the big fireplace—the cats and dogs going crackle, crackle, over the supper bones—the wind whistling—the clatter of voices——"

"The one thing missing is the scraping of thy violin, my Einar," his wife put in. "Come, thy fingers twitch; I know it; and our friends here would not, perhaps, object—eh?"

"A recital by Herr Larssen, free, and without the trouble of sitting still in a stuffy concert hall!" said Mrs. Walsh, and the ensuing chorus of rapturous assent sent Madame Larssen running for her lord's instrument.

"You have heard of my Da Salo?" Larssen inquired, as he lifted the violin from its travelling case. "My *Cavalancti* Da Salo? It is said Cavalancti sold his eternal welfare for the power to make a certain number of instruments that should approach as near the God-given perfection of Stradiaurius's work as devilry could accomplish."

He tilted the violin to show the play of light sinking in the amber lustre of it. "We will have no set pieces," he added, "but such old tunes as I played in our farm kitchen so far away and long ago!"

Tucking it under his chin, he swept us with the first notes right into the faery realm of sound. A realm of tingling frost that whipped the blood along the veins racingly, of icy wind that sang of the Elder Ice at the Back of Beyond: a very vocalization of the eternally young, eternally pure spirit of the Northland.

Ending with a queer suggestion of a lit farmhouse at night, the loneliness of stars and ice and snow crowding to it outside and inside fire and company, and the family spirit concentrating round the holy hearth and stretching out invisible strands of love to absent ones far out in the frozen whaling fields, or at mean work in foreign cities, or dead and cherishing in the other world memory of home.

Then he plunged into another tune, and another; snatches all, all singing of the North, and the Northern chasteness that is fierce and passionate as the foulest vice of all other quarters of earth.

"You will not hear these at a paid-for concert—God forbid!" he observed, his dreamy voice filling a pause between two melodies. "You are hearing, my friends, what few but children of Norway ever hear, scraps of the Huldrasleet. The melodies of the Elf-Kind—the Huldra Folk we name them—no less. Snatches that bygone musicians overheard on chancey nights out in the loneliness of fiords and fells, and passed on down the ages. The Huldra Folk are the musicians of all time."

"You would like to hear them?" asked Mrs. Walsh quizzically.

"I have heard them, dear Madame. Five times have I heard the Elf-Kind, invisible but audible, holding revels out in the empty winter nights and summer early mornings on the heights of the Dovrefeld—I, Einar Larssen."

Mrs. Walsh started a little; but the rest of us were not much surprised, if I can speak from analysis of my own feelings and a glance in the eyes of the others.

"There was one tune," Larssen went on meditatively. "It was a dark and windy night—like this one. I was searching for a strayed sheep. I found it in a field. Then, over a hedge, the melody began to flow. It *was* a tune! It got into my fingers and toes; I began to dance to it. There in the snow I danced, and my senses flowed out of my body in sheer ecstasy, while my emptied heart and head were filled with the tune."

His face queerly lit by firelight, his yellow mane tossing as he gesticulated illustratively, he carried us all on by the conviction of his voice over the monstrosity of his relation.

"Then the stark pines on the slope beyond the hedge bent and waved their branches—in time to the tune. The snow was swished about in powder, as the frozen grass-blades beneath waked and waved—to the tune. The stars began to glide about in the sky, and to bow themselves to and from the earth; growing bigger as they approached it and shrinking as they swirled back in the mazes of the dance—to the tune. Then, if you please, I woke. Woke, with the moon much farther across the heavens than she had been when the first note of the tune came to me, and the sheep I had come to find lying exhausted in a patch trampled flat and muddy by

its hoofs. And I, also, lay in the middle of a bare trampled patch in surrounding snow. That is the truth."

He drew breath and proceeded:

"I did not remember the tune entirely, though I had heard it repeated many times. A short tune; very short. When the Huldra fiddler reached its end he began again, round and round in a circle of music. The middle part I remember, but of the end and beginning only certain detached notes. I tried often by playing what I recollect to make the forgotten parts slip into their places, but unavailingly——"

He went to the main door and opened it. The wind swept in steadily, but the snowfall had stopped and a big moon looked down on piled white mountains and glaring snowfields. "It was so; clear, windy, and white, when I heard the tune," he said thoughtfully.

"Similarity of outward circumstances will revive a train of emotion or thought experienced long ago," Mrs. Walsh nodded.

He closed the door, and came back to the fire. Then his eyes lit and he drew the bow across the strings with a large gesture. Followed a few bars of melody. "The middle part," he explained.

Madame Larssen gave an abrupt little cry. "Einar, can it be you heard the Huldra King's Tune? Then thank Heaven you cannot play it!"

"Why, my beloved?" he lifted his eyebrows gently.

"In my district there was a tradition that one man once played it through and something happened."

"What happened?"

"Nobody quite remembered. But it was dreadful."

"What is the Huldra King's Tune?" asked Iris.

"It is the crowning piece of Huldra music, and there is a spell attached to it. An enchantment, Mademoiselle," Larssen elucidated.

". . . As long as it is played in its entirety, all who are present must dance to it," he further informed her, after reflection.

"That does not sound very dreadful," she laughed.

"There's something further." He became thoughtful.

"Ah; it is that the player cannot stop playing, whether he

would or not. He can only stop if—let me consider—yes, if he plays it backward or, failing that, if the strings of his violin are cut for him."

"You could safely play it now, Monsieur," said the landlord. "So far as I am concerned. My rheumatics would stop my dancing, however magically you played."

"And we"—Mrs. Walsh's gesture indicated the other ladies—"are resting to summon energy enough to crawl to bed. So, Herr Larssen, we are a safe audience if you can remember your wonderful tune."

"There was one more detail," he went on. "Ah, it is that if the tune is played often enough, inanimate things must dance, too."

"*That's* danger for us, as we are all nearly inanimate!" Mrs. Walsh yawned frankly now.

He leant against the carved mantel and for a little while he played absently, his subconscious mind busy with reconstruction, fumbling amidst its orderly lumber, connecting, paring, arranging. Then he straightened himself and swept the bow purposefully across the strings.

Slowly at first, then with added lilt and swing, there rippled forth the complete, horrible tune.

I knew it, for between a chiming start and a clattering last bar the broken chords he had first remembered fitted in followingly. It was not very long, that tune; he reached the end, leapt, as it were, to the beginning, played it through again, and so to a third repetition.

Then the wonder began. During the second repetition a movement like the passing of a breeze had run round our little assembly. Sleepy eyes opened, heels beat time, figures stiffened. At the third we were on our feet.

It seemed perfectly natural. Though I was almost too tired and shaken to stand, the tune ran into my feet; I made a step towards Iris and almost fell, fetched up against the wall, and so fell to dancing. Dancing calmly and solemnly all by myself.

Iris made a step towards me, too; paused and shook her head. "Poor boy, you must sit and rest," she murmured, and paired off with the Swiss lad.

Somewhat one knew the steps on first hearing the music. It was, perhaps, the Dance Primitive, holding in itself the potentialities of all saltatory art. Mainly it consisted of a mazy circling with a little crossing and up-and-down work, going on, over and over; monotonous yet tirelessly fascinating, like some Eastern music.

I repeat, it seemed perfectly natural. The landlord led off with his wife; they danced with decorous determination. Mrs. Walsh and Madame Larssen were footing it with all the abandon two women paired together could be expected to indulge in. Larssen himself had begun to dance, playing conscientiously the while. I circled about, a little uncertain on my feet, my slinged arm for partner, and Iris and the lad sailed amongst us, light as thistledown.

Those clumsy-looking Swiss boys are amongst the best dancers in the world. Whenever she passed me, Iris smiled, her eyes full of far-away ecstasy.

The music quickened and took a richer tone; it rang back from the walls, it melted and echoed in the timber ceiling; the floor-boards hummed with it; every nerve in us was tingling, laughing, almost crying with too much rapture of sound and motion.

Time, weariness, place, all were not. The dead beyond the door were forgotten, there was no Earth, no more Time, nothing but a ringing emptiness of melody, a singing storm of tunefulness on which one could lean and be carried like an eagle down the wind.

Yet, through all the intoxication of it, I was dimly aware that we were in a homely Swiss inn-parlour, at the same time that we were in the Fourth Dimension of music. I was rapt out of my shaken body, yet saw my surroundings clearly; saw, presently, the cat and dog rise and, on their hind legs, join in, keeping time and threading the maze unerringly.

That appeared neither wonderful nor laughable, only natural; but my dazed senses half-awoke when the two dead marmots slithered off the chest, rose on their hind feet, and, with pluffed-out tails swaying in time to the tune, and a queer little pit-a-pat of tiny feet, that I seemed to hear through the other noises, set to one another and circled with the best of us. They swung past me, their heads level with my knees,

and vanished amidst the other dancers. I noted their furry little faces, dropped jaws, frothy teeth, and glazed eyes. Dead, most undoubtedly dead, and dancing!

The cat and dog passed me again, and the marmots chanced to be near at the same time. The dog wrinkled his upper lip, disgusted at the deadness of them; the cat snapped at them in passing. The queerest thing was the others, with one exception, did not seem to notice the four small additions to the company. Only Larssen, figuring solemnly with his fiddle for partner, saw. His eyes protruded as they squinted along the Da Salo at the quartette. "Dead," he gulped.

"Stop now, man!" I called. "This fooling—"

"I cannot," he cried back hoarsely, and began the melody over again for the fifteenth time at least. "The tradition is true—"

Then, as the opening movement rippled forth again, in the inner room three crashes sounded.

Two almost simultaneously, yet singularly distinct from one another, the third a few seconds later. Loud, resonant, wooden crashes. Then silence in that room, and in ours the swell and swing of the infernal melody and the pat of dancing feet.

The sound had been too pronounced for even enthralled senses to disregard. All looked at the door for a moment. The others forgot the interruption at once and danced on, eyes blank with ecstasy; only Larssen's face went white and the landlord's mottled grey. "Stop, Monsieur!" the landlord cried.

"I cannot!" wailed Larssen, his voice shrill with horror. "I cannot! For Heaven's sake, Monsieur Lambton, come and cut the strings!"

"My hands are useless—" I began, and stopped at a new sound.

You must understand that I had danced nearer to the door by that time. The new sound behind it was one of scuffling and scrambling, half a dozen sounds merged in one, then—pat, pat, patter, patter, pat—was a noise of steps keeping time to the tune.

Soft steps, you'll understand, not the click of shod feet,

like ours. I went round, came in range again, and listened.

A fairly heavy thumping—like a man on stockinginged feet—was approaching the door. “What’s the matter, Cyril?” asked Iris, swaying by, still rapt, as the boy and the three other women were. She did not wait for an answer. The latch of the door rattled. The latch inside the other room, you understand.

“I’ll play it backwards when I can!” gasped Larssen, as we crossed each other’s track. The noises in the fatal room circled away from the door, then approached, and the latch was unhasped this time before the horrible soft-falling thumps retreated. You see how it was: as we were compelled to circle round our room so, whatever it was in the other room had to circle likewise, making an attempt whenever the door was in reach to open it and join us and the tune.

Larssen was fiddling desperately. “Backwards now!” I implored.

“I cannot—yet. But if I repeat it a few more times, I shall be able to reverse it,” he called back.

A few more rounds would be too late. The inner room noises reached the door and it opened a crack. If—what was striving to come—joined us, would even ecstasy blind the women? And when the waking came—? I flung myself against the door in passing; it snapped to again. “A few more repetitions!” panted Larssen.

Inspiration came to me. The others, dancing in a hypnotized state, circled widely, but I could do the steps within a small compass: in front of the door.

I could do it. I did it. Larssen made an attempt to reverse the melody. He failed.

Two more repetitions. Iris and her partner, passing me, smiled at the quaint figure I must have cut, dancing by myself in narrow circles before the door. Larssen’s ashen face was running with sweat that dripped from his chin and trickled, like the slack of a tide, over the amber glory of the Da Salo. The padding steps approached the door; it was jerked a little ajar. I drove it back with my sound shoulder; but a new danger arose. They—the dancers within—were imitating my tactics. They danced in a circumscribed space that grew smaller as the minutes passed.

If only we could have got the women out of the way! I gyrated, as well as I could, before the door all the time, driving it back with my shoulder as it was thrust ajar, again and again.

Picture it. See me, one arm in a sling and the other nearly powerless, prancing and twirling before the door, trying the while to keep a temperate expression on my sweat-drenched features for the benefit of the women. The landlord only kept from dropping with fear by the magic of the tune. Larssen stepping it absurdly, trickling features set like a Greek tragic mask, his long yellow tresses bobbing about, matted into rats'-tails, his eyes glaring down at the flooded, humming Da Salo. The women and the lad, unconscious of everything save the melody, dancing with the introspective gaze of the drugged.

The door was thrust ajar once more. I dashed it back, but not before a soft padding had pattered from the bottom of the opened crack into our room.

I almost collapsed. Cat and dog and dead marmots—oh, they were respectable beside the latest addition to our company!

The people circled on; the dog, the cat, the dead marmots, they all circled; and circling with them—but keeping ever a course that drew it nearer and nearer to Larssen all the while—was a little dark shadow with a long, thin, tarnished white gleam sticking from it. I beat back the door and what more was pressing against it, and fought with nausea.

Round and round Larssen's feet, nearer and nearer, the little shadow hopped, leapt, and pattered. Leaping and springing. It jumped higher and higher, always in time to the music—higher and higher—high as Larssen's elbow. In another minute I knew even the enraptured dancers could not fail to see it. The door was now beaten on, beaten with soft-falling, fierce thuds. I could not keep it shut much longer—

Up sprang the little shadow and the tarnished gleam, clear over Larssen's shoulder. A series of twangling, discordant snaps, that seemed to prick one's brain physically, and the tune stopped dead.

Thud! It sounded behind the door—very heavy. Then

a succession of smaller thuds. I leant against the wall, panting. The dancers stopped, every face dazed and stupefied, and in an automatic way each dropped into the nearest seat.

Larssen dashed his handkerchief over his face. I contrived to throw my own on the floor behind him before he staggered to the fireplace. With my most usable hand I also managed to pick up my property again and place it on the seat, behind me, as I sat down on the chest by the door. The marmots were on the floor near my feet; I was enabled to hide my face for a few seconds, and to compose it, as I picked them up.

The eyes of the others cleared and became intelligent. "I really think I've been asleep," said Mrs. Walsh.

"I believe I have," Iris rubbed her eyes.

"I think I have too," laughed Madame Larssen.

The landlord had made himself scarce at once, probably doubting his histrionic powers at such short notice. His wife followed him. The boy sat dazed.

"I had a dream, a ridiculous dream, too ridiculous to repeat," Mrs. Walsh proceeded.

"I had a dream, likewise too absurd to relate," said Madame Larssen.

"I had—" Iris checked herself, and looked sudden apology at Larssen, who had arranged himself with the light at his back.

"Do not fear to hurt my feelings," he said blandly, his voice still a little unnatural. "You were all tired before I began. In brief, Mademoiselle, I am not broken at the heart because my music had a soporific effect on you all."

"It wasn't as if you had been playing one of your own compositions," she apologized. "I am sleepy, mother; I vote we make a move."

"Yes, we will tuck up our drowsiness in bed before it has a chance to insult anyone further," Madame Larssen chimed in gaily.

They trooped off; Larssen kept his face in shadow, I stood carefully before the chest, while bidding them good night. When they had gone, the landlord came back. For a little

while we four men stared at one another. "Surely I have had a dream, gentlemen," said the landlord imploringly.

We said nothing. He hesitated, then, with the haste of dislike, snatched a candle and flung open the inner door. "Oh, Holy Virgin!" he cried.

Three coffins lay as they had tumbled from their trestles. About the room was spilt and tangled the coarse linen that charity had contributed—

The landlord reeled against one doorpost. Larssen clung, limp, to the other. "I'll burn the Da Salo before I'll play that tune again!" he whispered hoarsely.

I stepped back into the large room, brought my handkerchief, and from its folds replaced in one of the coffins a shrivelled hand grasping the tarnished knife that had cut the violin strings. The boy, most composed of us all, said stolidly:

"Ah, Messieurs, it appears that the dead do not enjoy being disturbed!"

# The Scourge of Mektoub

PAUL ERNST

As Lieutenant to the great Mektoub, the Sheik Lakhdar was a powerful man in west North Africa. He was not so powerful as the mild but mighty Echamachi. He was, in comparison to that other aid of the leader, as the left hand is to the right. Echamachi ranked him, as they say in America. But for all that, as left hand of the rebel chieftain, Mektoub, Lakhdar was a power in the region from Tangiers south to the Congo, and from Touggourt west to the sea.

Many men censured Mektoub for giving so high a position to such a character as Lakhdar. Many men, otherwise in sympathy with the intelligent outlaw who was such a thorn in the side of Spain, France, and the French colonies, shook their heads over his choice of a left-hand man. Lakhdar, they said, was not a man; he was a monster of cruelty. Why should so wise and altruistic a leader as Mektoub blind his eyes to the atrocities committed by his second highest subordinate?

A few surmised that the rebel leader had deliberately chosen so sadistic an individual for certain ends. In every rebellion there is need of occasional acts of intimidation to keep the natives from turning traitor and handing the rebels over to the authorities. There is need of that powerful ally—fear. And a few declared that Mektoub used Lakhdar as his scourge, deplored the necessity of his use, but taking advantage, for his own advancement, of the sheik's innate love of torturing his fellow men.

However, for whatever reason Lakhdar had been raised to power by Mektoub—whose name in Arabic means: It is written—the fact remains that raised to power he was. And he used that power to indulge himself frequently in the orgies of blood-letting and torture that his warped soul craved.

He was on his way, on this glaringly bright morning, to

appease this ferocious craving with an especially delightful programme that was to take place in a Bedouin encampment far south and west of Touggourt.

Seen from afar, Lakhdar's band made a picturesque sight. Over the mountainous, dazzling dunes they filed on their lurching camels, a moving bas-relief against the turquoise of the sky. Red and blue and white were their garments, bold colours worn by even bolder men, that contrasted savagely with the dun hue of the camels. But viewed from a nearer point they became less romantic in appearance.

The riffraff of the rebel army went to Lakhdar. These men he had chosen for the planned atrocity were typical. There were a few renegade Senegalese, several traitorous Spaniards from the slums of Tangiers, and outcast Arabs from Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. Stalwart, scarred ruffians, these, who obeyed their more polished but far more callous leader to the death.

Lakhdar himself, riding in the lead on a white camel, looked at first to be a much different sort of man than he really was. He was spare and tall, with a sparse beard sprinkled over his chin, and a snow-white turban the immaculacy of which was his particular pride. His hands were slender and finely shaped, with tapering artistic fingers. His nose was aquiline and handsome. But his eyes and mouth gave him away. His eyes were the narrowed, steely slits of a panther. His mouth was granite-hard; a thin slit of cruelty. Dressed in a burnoose of the finest blue French broadcloth, and a gondurah of sheerest gossamer wool, he was a dagger in a velvet sheath—a phial of poison in a rose-scented case.

"How much farther to this Bedouin hovel?" he inquired in Arabic of the man riding a little behind him.

"A little less than two hours' ride, illustrious one," the swarthy, shifty-eyed Arab made answer.

Lakhdar nodded, and settled back to pleasant thoughts of the play that was to come.

When an arrogant, egotistic man is scorned by a woman he is, naturally, furious. When the woman further falls into the arms of that man's hated rival, he becomes even more furious. And when she goes on to send him a defiant, contemptuous message—a message in which she states that were

he the last male human on earth, and she the last female, still would she loathe him and flee from him—it becomes a matter for bitter vengeance!

Such had recently happened to Lakhdar. The woman—or girl, for she was just turned fifteen—was Fahtma, known as the Rose of Meknes; and the rival was Echamachi, right hand of Mektoub.

On one of his clandestine visits to Meknes, where he was in danger from the French authorities during every second of his stay, he had met the Rose in the home of a friend. He had committed the crime of entering her apartment by stealth when she was unveiled; and had immediately succumbed to her loveliness. He had killed the friend and taken the girl and her servant, a twisted, ancient jungle woman from east of Dakhar, to his camp. There, while he was preparing leisurely for the conquest of the tigerish little cat he had borne off by force, the detested Echamachi had chanced to visit him with a message from Mektoub.

It was the Evil One's own luck that Echamachi should have chanced to come at that moment. For he was, as has been said, mild though mighty, humane and kindly though a rebel chieftain's highest subordinate.

He had calmly taken the Rose under his protection, and carried her with him back to his own camp. There he had offered to convey her to whatever place of sanctuary she desired. And—she had desired to stay with him! Lakhdar had got that piece of infuriating news from one of the spies he kept in his rival's camp. She had begged him to keep her beside him in peace and in war. Echamachi, being no less human than the rest of mankind, had promised to keep her—the luscious Rose of Lakhdar's desire—with him in peace.

Now it was war. Echamachi was leading a raiding party a thousand kilometres south and west of Lakhdar's camp. He was out of the way for days to come. And he had left Fahtma with a humble Bedouin in whom he had little enough trust, but to whose fear of his power he looked for the Rose's safekeeping.

Lakhdar grinned evilly and unconsciously urged his mount to greater speed. Echamachi had apparently never dreamed

that Mektoub's left hand would dare open action against his right. It had never occurred to him that the scourge of the rebel army would risk his open displeasure. Otherwise, surely, he wouldn't have ridden off a thousand kilometres, leaving his darling in a mangy Bedouin encampment that boasted less than twenty able-bodied men. Ah, he would regret that carelessness! And Fahtma—she would regret that she had ever been born!

Ahead showed the cluster of squat black tents of the Bedouins, beside a tiny, almost non-existent oasis. Lakhdar and his band swept up to it. Going into the biggest tent, Lakhdar prepared to take command of the miserable, temporary village.

At his approach a woman with faded blue tattoo marks on her forehead scuttled away; and a tall, ancient man whose somewhat stupid eyes gleamed with alarm at this visit of Mektoub's left hand, rose deferentially from a filthy straw mat.

This was a great honour, he mumbled toothlessly. Would not the illustrious Lakhdar deign to rest himself and partake of his poor hospitality? Lakhdar would.

Not for several hours did he come to the point of his visit. Meanwhile he savoured the terror the girl, Fahtma, must be feeling. Somewhere, in one of the tents, she was cowering fearfully, wondering at the call of the man she had so rashly scorned, and yet knowing in her heart why he had come—knowing, with her lover so far away, that she was helpless in Lakhdar's hands.

"Thou hast a girl here I have come for," he said at last to the old Bedouin. "She is Fahtma, Rose of Meknes. She is a traitress to our cause. I have come to punish her."

The old man stirred restlessly and for an instant a glint of opposition appeared in his eyes.

"A traitress? Surely thou art mistaken, great one."

"I have made no mistake. She is proven guilty." Lakhdar sought for a plausible lie. "She led the French to the hiding-place of a trusted man of mine. They executed the man, and came into possession of valuable dispatches he was

carrying from Mektoub himself. For that she is to die. Slowly."

"But surely the wise Echamachi would have known of this if it were true."

Lakhdar rose to his straight, lean height and glared down at the Bedouin.

"Thou durst to tell me I lie, son of a mangy she-dog? I say she is marked for punishment, and I am the instrument sent to work her well-deserved death."

For a time the ancient one was silent, with a palpable debate showing in his eyes. Echamachi had charged him with the girl's safety. But Lakhdar was here, and Echamachi was not. And Lakhdar was—the Scourge.

His mind was suddenly made up for him. Lakhdar stepped to the flap of the tent and snapped an order. His men were to search the place till Fahtma was found. Then they were to station themselves, two to each tent, and disarm the Bedouins as they came in from grazing their livestock.

He stared at the old man, who shrank involuntarily away from him. "I have need of this tent," he said. "Go."

The Bedouin went, with a fatalistic glance toward the heavens. "I am old and feeble," that glance said. "It is the will of Allah that this girl die in spite of Echamachi's wish. Who am I to oppose the will of Allah?"

Hardly had he left when there was a disturbance outside the tent. The flap was lifted and Fahtma was thrust, struggling, before the man who had desired her and who now hated her with a hatred so great that he was risking his position with the great Mektoub, his very life, in pursuit of revenge.

Panting, glaring hatred and defiance at him, she crouched in the centre of the odorous, bare tent. And Lakhdar stared back at her, his eyes narrowed to steely slits and his mouth a thin line above his sparse beard.

She was a beautiful thing, this Fahtma. Great, lustrous dark eyes peered from their thickets of lashes, their lustre brightened by the kohl that masked her eyelids. Delicate and ivory-coloured gleamed her bare ankles under her baggy harem trousers. Her arms were like animated masterpieces

carved in old ivory. And the flesh of her throat maddened the lips with its allure. Very nearly Lakhdar forgot his bloody purpose when he gazed at her. Very nearly, but not quite.

"Ah, the traitress," he purred. "She who was clever enough to blind the keen Echamachi to her treason. But not clever enough to blind *me*. No. I have knowledge of her crime, and I have come to punish in the name of Mektoub."

"Traitress?" repeated Fahtma, trying desperately for calm. "I am no traitress! I am as loyal as the mighty one himself!"

"It is proven," Lakhdar cut in suavely, his eyes icily cool in their stare. "The messenger, Mohamed, was betrayed to the French by thee. So am I, the second power in the land, sent to deal with thee fitly."

"Thou liest!" panted Fahtma. "Twice thou liest! Once when thou sayest I have betrayed any of the Leader's men—and once when thou sayest thou art the second power. Thou art third. And far art thou beneath my beloved Echamachi!"

"We shall see who is second, Echamachi or myself. We shall see if Echamachi arrives in time to stop the course of justice."

He dropped his contemptuously informal tone, and his voice became stern and judicial.

"Thou hast been tried and found guilty. I have determined thy punishment.

"The soles of thy feet shall be cut off and thou shalt be made to walk upon the desert's burning sands. Thou shalt be slowly flayed alive with light scourges. Then shalt thou be buried to the chin in the sand, and left to await the mercy of Allah. Thy punishment will commence with the rising of the sun to-morrow. It is my command."

The girl's face blanched as the terrible words rolled out. Her lips quivered like the lips of a terrified child, then were proudly still. She drew a deep breath and stood straight before him, a regal little figure in the dingy tent.

"Everything thou dost to me—shall also be done to thee," she promised quietly. "My beloved cannot return in time to

stop this awful thing. But some day, in Allah's own good time, he will come here for me. And then—thy days will be numbered, oh great and benevolent Lakhdar."

A vein writhed in Lakhdar's forehead. He spat at the girl.

"Bah! Offspring of a sow and a diseased goat! I say this is Mektoub's own judgment come upon thee. And Echamachi will be powerless. Go now, to the tent behind this, and prepare for thine ordeal of the morrow."

Proudly, erectly, the girl went out, to be seized at the entrance flap by two of Lakhdar's stalwart desperadoes and dragged roughly to the indicated tent.

Lakhdar frowned a little as he pondered over the words of the Rose. Echamachi was, after all, his superior. And he loved Fahtma. . . .

He summoned the old Bedouin. "A word in the ear of the wise, ancient one," he said brusquely. "It is Mektoub's desire that no whisper of this just execution reach his trusted right hand, Echamachi. The Leader knows Echamachi's infatuation for Fahtma. It will be best if he never learns what has befallen her."

The Bedouin stared resignedly at him.

"Dost understand, misbegotten one?" Lakhdar snarled.

"I understand," sighed the old man.

"It is well thou dost. For if any word is ever whispered to Echamachi, all in thy camp shall die. And for thee—shall be reserved the death of impalement."

The man shuddered at the threat. Impalement! That death wherein a man dies for three or four days of a pointed stake pressing upward through his vitals.

"I have said I understood, illustrious one," he mumbled, his hands shaking as though in an attack of palsy. He turned and went, his leaving resembling panic-stricken flight.

The frown left Lakhdar's face. All was now complete. He had the girl. Echamachi was over six hundred English miles away. And Fahtma's fate would never be revealed. All the world would ever know was that she had somehow disappeared from the Bedouin village where she had been left for safekeeping.

A few yards away the Rose of Meknes lay huddled in terror and despair on her mat. Out of sight of her captor she gave herself up to the paralysing fear his sentence had instilled in her. To tread the desert on feet from which the soles had been sliced! To be slowly flayed alive and buried to the chin! She moaned, and rocked back and forth in misery.

Squatted a few feet away from her and looking at her with the dumb sympathy that a faithful animal might show, was the wrinkled old savage who served her.

She seemed hardly human, this misshapen black who had been torn from her jungle village in her youth and brought north as a slave. Her kinky hair was long and ragged, and hung like a frowsy white fringe down over her face. She peered from behind this like a wary, small beast in ambush. She was so old and wasted that she seemed nothing but a bundle of bones insecurely held together by parchment-like skin and corded sinews. Yet there was an inexplicable air of power about her; as though it were not a part of her, but an extraneous thing that surrounded her like a borrowed cloak. In her village, long ago, strange tales had been told of her mother, who was held in a reverence that the jungle peoples, little better than the animals among which they lived, seldom gave their women.

"M'golo," moaned the Rose. "Oh, M'golo. . . ."

The aged black crept to her side and was enfolded in Fahtma's young arms. The girl clung to her, shaken with sobs.

"M'golo, can nothing be done? Is this indeed the will of Allah?"

"I know not thine Allah," mumbled the slave woman in the mongrel Arabic she had picked up during her years of servitude. "I know only the devil-devils of my own race. And I know they would not desert thee thus."

"Then canst not thou summon—" For an instant the Rose faltered and stopped. She was of the true faith. Allah is Allah. But women are usually more practical than men in the crises of religion; and the doom in store for her overcame her scruples swiftly enough. "Canst thou not summon thy —thy devil-devils to aid me now? Thou hast heard what Lakhdar intends."

The expression on the aged face changed. The wrinkled lips drew back in an animalistic snarl that revealed a few remnants of teeth that had once been filed to needle points.

"I have heard," she replied after a moment.

"And thou wouldest allow such a thing to happen to thy Rose, whom thou hast mothered from infancy? Surely not if it were in thy power to prevent it, oh M'golo?"

The wild black eyes gleamed sombrely behind the strings of hair. The withered, claw-like hands trembled a little.

"I know not if it be in my power to prevent this," she muttered doubtfully. "I have been long from my land and from my devil-devils. But perhaps . . . perhaps . . ."

"Perhaps what?" begged the Rose piteously. "Canst thou really summon—"

"Hush," commanded the wrinkled slave. Into her bastard Arabic a new note crept—an imperious note. The odd power, that appeared to surround her and invest her feebleness with unlooked-for strength, seemed to increase till it was an almost tangible aura. "I know not if anything can be done. But I could try. Now sleep, my dove."

"Sleep!" exclaimed Fahtma. "Thinkest thou I could sleep? With such a fate waiting for me in the morning?"

"Even so," said the black. "I shall lead thee to slumber. Come. Lay thyself comfortably on the mat. So."

Fahtma's lithe body was tense as rock. Her eyelids fluttered open and shut, and her breathing was convulsive. Yet, even as she had promised, the slave woman led her to slumber.

Her cracked old voice crooned a melody, wild, monotonous, with a few oft-repeated syllables in the clicking, guttural dialect of her tribe. Her claw-like hands passed softly over Fahtma's forehead and down her throat, hesitating at the base of that slender column and pressing there. Gradually the girl's body relaxed. In half an hour she was breathing regularly, sleeping as heavily as though in a hypnotic trance.

Afternoon faded to twilight while she slept. Dusk deepened to night. And then M'golo began to busy herself in a strange business.

With three straws of the lean, desert grass, she made a

three-legged frame like a miniature artist's easel. Over this she draped several hairs from her head.

At Lakhdar's orders her knife had been taken away from her. Stepping now to the door and accosting the guard, she asked if he would let her use his dagger for a moment. Suspicious, he refused; until she assured him that he could retain his hold on it if he wished. Then he drew it out, and watched in stupid perplexity as she pressed her arm firmly against the point.

Leaving him, she went back into the tent. From the cut she squeezed several drops of blood, which she let drip over the hairs that hung from the tiny straw frame.

Next she secured a few chips of camel dung. This was saturated with a musky-smelling, dark, thick liquid which she poured from a small phial produced from somewhere in the voluminous folds of her garments.

On the soaked dung she set up the straws and the blood-soaked hairs. Then, laboriously, she set fire to the lot, striking primitive flint and steel till at last the chips caught. A tiny, clear blue flame leaped into being. This endured for far longer than it would seem to have a right to. Almost an hour it burned; while, squatting over it with her eyes rolled up to reveal their muddy, rheumy whites, M'golo muttered and mumbled.

When the fire had finally flickered out, leaving nothing but a pinch of whitish ash, M'golo stopped her mumbling. She moistened her finger-tips and placed them in the ashes, most of which adhered to her fingers.

She rose and walked to the sleeping girl. An instant she hovered over her, an aged, bat-like figure with outstretched, skinny hands. Then she stooped and lightly smeared the ashes on her forehead, over her heart, and on the soles of her feet.

Fahtma stirred restlessly in her deep slumber. Her slim body writhed and twisted as though in sudden agony. Sharp exclamations rose to her lips; and her hands pressed against her breast as if something within were beating wild wings in an effort to burst out to freedom.

Through it all, however, her sleep held. And gradually her movements subsided till once more she was immobile.

As her tossing and turning dwindled, M'golo's activities reached a climax. Her hands had been weaving mystic patterns in the air. Now they were raised above her head, and she shrieked, once, like a soul in torment.

In alarm the Arab at the entrance pressed his ear to the flap. There was no further outcry, and he could hear the breathing of the Rose, sound in slumber. He grunted and relaxed.

Lakhdar, sleeping fitfully a few yards away in the old Bedouin's tent, moved sharply and groaned. Then he sank back into oblivion and was still.

After her cry M'golo was silent. She remained motionless, her skinny arms upraised, her bright old eyes boring down at the body of Fahtma. Breathlessly she waited.

In the darkness of the tent something veil-like and tenuous seemed to shimmer for an instant over the Rose's body. It might have been a reflected glint of the moon through a rift in the rough wooden tent-top. It might have been—nothing but the imagination of an old jungle woman.

It disappeared, M'golo noted, seeming to float toward the tent wall that abutted against the tent in which Lakhdar slept.

Tensely she peered at the wall through which the thing had melted. Then it reappeared—assuming "it" had reality at all. It hovered over the sleeping girl, seeming to have been enlarged slightly and to be wavering reluctantly in opposition to some driving force. Like a collapsing shred of mist it sank into the beautifully-moulded body.

M'golo sighed deeply, and her arms slowly lowered to her sides. As one dead, she tumbled forward on her face and lay unconscious.

The sun, a great red ball of fire, thrust the tip of its rim over the rolling dunes of the eastern horizon. The darkness fled toward the west, leaving the desert bathed in pink and gold. Lakhdar, Scourge of Mektoub, sighed and woke up.

A feeling of extreme well-being possessed him; and for a moment he could not understand why. Then comprehension came to him.

Fahtma, the Rose of Meknes, she who had thought the

love of the great Lakhdar a thing to be scorned—she was to be dealt with, bitterly, lingeringly, on this day! That was why he felt so exultant. He recalled the sentence he had passed on her the day before, and his breath came faster.

There are men whose pleasure lies almost wholly in the pain they can inflict on others. Lakhdar was such a man. The torturing of others, at any time, was a delight to him. And, on an occasion like this, where the pain to be inflicted was not only wanton torment but also in the nature of a vengeance—

He stretched and sat up with a smile on his lips. Fahtma, through the long sleepless night, must have suffered a hundred times the agony of her approaching terrible death.

A slanting ray of the rising sun penetrated the entrance flap. He smiled again. Time for the amusement to begin. He'd show the Rose who was master! And when Echamachi returned and asked for her—

His pleasant thoughts broke abruptly into a confusion of bewilderment. He stared at his ankles, blinked his eyes to clear them of the impossible vision they saw, and stared again.

His eyes were trying to tell him that he had on baggy harem trousers such as women wore. And that under them, between turn-toed shoes and trouser fabric, gleamed delicate, ivory-coloured bare ankles.

They were the ankles of a girl. Of a young, beautiful girl. They were not his ankles. What in the name of all the fiends were they doing attached to his legs? Or were they?

Blinking his eyes again, he moved his legs. With the movement the baggy trousers moved, and the slim ankles drew up under him. He reached out a hand to touch them, trembling suddenly in the grip of a freezing, superstitious horror.

His eyes, starting out of their sockets, saw his hand as a girl's hand. Small, it was, with hennaed finger-tips. And on its third finger was a small silver ring whose ownership—in the name of Allah!—was only too well known to him!

He stared insanely around the tent. It was not the tent in which he had gone to sleep. It was a smaller tent, less pretentious and well kept—

Here, attracted by the sound of a slight movement behind

him, he turned his head and saw an aged black woman squatting on her haunches and regarding him. Her beady black eyes peered at him fixedly from behind a ragged fringe of white hair. Her face was as expressionless as an ugly mask carved in wood. The Rose's servant. What was she doing beside *him*!

Lakhdar began to pant like a trapped animal that has waked from a serene sleep in accustomed surroundings to find itself staring between cage bars into hideous, unknowable territory. Sweat formed on his forehead, and he felt as though unseen fingers were strangling him to suffocation.

An unaccustomed weight made him move his head involuntarily. With the move he felt something tingle against his throat. His hand, going up to investigate, felt long, silky hair. A girl's hair!

Lakhdar sprang to his feet with a shout. At least, it was meant to be a shout. Actually it came from his lips as a shrill, womanish scream.

One of his men pushed aside the tent flap and stared in.

"Allah be with thee, Rose of Meknes," said the man, leering at Lakhdar and bowing low in mock servility. "Thy chances might have been improved hadst thou slept in another tent than this, accompanied by other than thy black servant, here. Perhaps our leader might have been constrained to change his mind about thy sentence."

Lakhdar swayed drunkenly from side to side. "Fool! Idiot!" he tried to shout. "*I* am thy leader! Having eyes, canst thou not see—"

Only a thin, piercing shriek came from his mouth. He clapped his hand—that delicate, strangely girlish hand—over his soft red lips. The man leered again, and withdrew.

Close after his disappearance a tall, lithe figure strode in. It was clad in a burnoose of blue, French broadcloth, under which was a gondurah of sheer, gossamer wool. Lakhdar found himself gazing up into the narrowed eyes and vulpine face of—himself.

"The sun has risen, oh Rose of Meknes," were the words that came from the thin, cruel lips. "Art thou ready for the sentence—the wise, most just sentence—I imposed on thee yesterday?"

Lakhdar, his reason tottering, gazed up at the relentless, fierce eyes.

"Mercy," he sobbed. "Mercy! Thou knowest what dread thing has happened in the night. I can see in thine eyes that thou knowest. For the love of Allah, mercy!"

The one in the blue burnoose pondered a moment, with mock gravity. Then: "Thou hast a reason to present as to why thy fate should be changed? Thou hast a plea to make?"

"Reason enough," whimpered Lakhdar, in the thin sweet voice that would not be lowered to his own deep tone. "Reason enough! And a plea to move Allah himself. Thou knowest, I tell thee. Thou art me, and I am—I am thee——"

"Thy words are those of one without mind, beautiful Rose," the tall one made answer. "Come. It is time——"

"No, no, no!" Lakhdar shrieked, tearing at the soft woman's body of him. "I am *not* the Rose! I am Lakhdar, the Scourge of Mektoub! I tell thee——"

"Bind her hands," was the curt order.

Lakhdar felt his wrists seized in hands that completely encircled them. He struggled hysterically, but found that his strength had diminished till he was helpless as a child.

"Thou knowest me," he pleaded, glancing up from one to another of the indifferent faces. "I am Lakhdar! And he—she"—he pointed—"is the Rose!"

The men looked at each other and shrugged. "Mad," was the verdict Lakhdar read in their eyes.

Into the blazing sun he was dragged. One of his men drew a scimitar, razor-sharp. They laid him flat on the sand, and the scimitar was poised above his feet.

"For the last time," screamed the lovely, writhing captive, "I tell thee I am Lakhdar! There has been devil's work——"

The words melted into a shriek of agony as the blade, directed with surgical precision, descended on the slim white feet. . . .

The Scourge of Mektoub's rebel army has changed as completely as though he were another person, people say. Lakhdar is no longer the monster of cruelty he was. His power is used wisely and tolerantly; and when, as is inevitable

some day, he falls into the hands of the French, there will be many to mourn his death.

In another way, too, he has changed. Where once he was the bitter, secret foe of the mild but mighty Echamachi, he is now that man's closest friend, and attends him as faithfully as his shadow. Which is strange, remembering his one-time vindictive hate.

Stranger still is the gentle solicitude with which he treats the slave woman who served the Rose of Meknes—before the Rose disappeared, no man knows whither. Lakhdar's men cannot understand the attachment he has formed for the aged M'golo. They saw the ferocity with which he went through with the Rose's torment that day in the Bedouin camp. Why, now, should he be so kind to the Rose's servant? Ah, well, Allah alone knows the why of the mysteries that transpire on His earth.



## Rats

MICHAEL ANNESLEY

THE light of a camp-fire revealed a pleasant scene. Two big, white caravans and three cars stood parked, up to their hubs in lush meadow grass. Behind lay the hills and the long white road, in front was a swiftly-flowing stream in which the caravaners had washed the dust of the road from their bodies at the end of a long hot day.

Mike Halliday lit his pipe and uttered a sigh of sheer satisfaction, as he lay back in a battered old Rorkee chair. A giant of a man, home from East Africa on leave, this was the sort of life he knew and loved. From the water's edge a chorus of frogs croaked discordantly; upon the steps of a caravan Mary Halliday sat, and, in her arms, lay her year-old son, Hector, kicking and crooning contentedly as, with solemn eyes, he regarded a big yellow moon, across which a wrack of black-bellied clouds raced continually.

Sir Edward Fanshawe, flannel-clad and tidy, emerged from his tent, a sardonic smile upon his features as his eyes encountered the spectacle of his old school-friend, whose sun-bleached khaki-shorts and bush-blouse furnished a sharp contrast to his own immaculate attire. Lady Fanshawe peered out over her husband's shoulder.

"Rain before morning, Mike," suggested the baronet, with a glance for the cloud-obscured moon. "I fancy you'll be sorry you did not bring some thicker clothing."

"I love my old khaki and the freedom of movement it gives me," Mike answered, stretching his limbs. "There's no adventurous risk in England, but one likes to 'dress the part'."

"Even to the hunting-knife," Sir Edward chuckled. "Do you carry a revolver as well?"

Mike's cheeks flushed, as his hand stole beneath the skirt of his bush-blouse, which hid a small holster, buckled to his belt.

"It's sheer force of habit," he apologized.

"Do be careful, Mr. Halliday," interposed Lady Fanshawe nervously, "I am scared to death of firearms."

"Jolly useful things where I come from," growled Mike, "and, even in England, well—one never knows."

A squeak and a scurry in the rushes, close at hand, attracted their attention, and little Hector ceased staring at the moon to listen.

"Rats, that's another sign of bad weather," pronounced Mike Halliday indifferently.

"Rats, how horrible! I simply loathe rats!" exclaimed Lady Fanshawe, with difficulty repressing a scream.

Mary smiled quietly. The years she had spent with her husband, far beyond the fringes of civilization, had driven out fear. Baby Hector continued to croon contentedly to himself.

Soon after midnight the storm burst. Mike Halliday was awakened by the sound of the rain lashing down on to the roof of his canvas lean-to and, for some moments, lay listening to the exultant croaking of the frogs, so loud that it rose above the fury of the storm. Outside, in the darkness, the river bank was alive with voles, and in every old house in Burford, half a mile away, rats were stirring; for rodents have a peculiar prescience where bad weather is concerned.

Striking camp the next morning was not a pleasant business. Merciless rain had turned the beauty of the lush-green meadow into a veritable quagmire; there were wet tents and sodden bedding to be stored away; Sir Edward's once immaculate flannels clung to his long thin limbs, and Lady Fanshawe never ceased grumbling. Only Mike and Mary remained cheerful, although they were as completely drenched as their companions. Baby Hector howled dismally. The poor mite of humanity, born in tropical sunshine, was not enjoying his first taste of an English summer.

By dint of much man-handling, and with the aid of half a dozen farm labourers, the cars and caravans were at last disinterred from the now muddy field and got on to the highway. Half-way up the hill through Burford town, however, Mike Halliday's car jibbed at the weight of the caravan behind it and could not be moved until further manual aid was enlisted.

"Commend me to England for a happy holiday," he growled, as, flopping down into the pool of water which filled the driving-seat, he took the road to Gloucester.

"Perhaps the weather will break presently," said Mary, seeking, hopefully, to find grounds for offering consolation to her very cold and wet husband.

But the weather did not break. All day long the wind-driven rain lashed at the windows and side-curtains of the caravans and cars. A cold lunch was prepared and eaten in damp discomfort, and did nothing to raise the spirits of the disgruntled wayfarers. Mike and Mary were dourly determined to go on, Sir Edward was openly doubtful about the wisdom of doing so, and Lady Fanshawe, totally unaccustomed to any form of hardship, was almost tearful. Baby Hector continued to howl dismally and, down in the valleys, where the rivers already were overflowing their banks, legions of rats, storm-wise in their generation, were beginning to desert their ancient homes, in the hope of finding safer and drier quarters.

"I vote that we stop at the next town and put up for the night at a decent hotel," Sir Edward suggested diffidently.

"That be damned for a tale," Mike answered. "If you come caravaning, you've got to take the rough with the smooth, else where's the pleasure in looking back upon the hardships afterwards?"

"I should prefer a little civilized, Christian comfort at the moment," said Lady Fanshawe tartly, as she sought to straighten her sodden and dishevelled hair.

"Right-o!" answered Mike, seeking a satisfactory compromise, "we'll push on until we find a dry barn to sleep in. How will that do?"

Sir Edward and his wife agreed grudgingly, and the caravans proceeded on their way down the wet, white road. Meantime, the dusk was falling and, along field-paths and drains, up the declivity of muddy by-ways and even along the edges of main roads, thousands upon thousands of bedraggled rodents were making their way toward the heights, fleeing quietly and swiftly from the flood-waters that were rising behind them.

At Berkeley the caravaners found the sort of place they

were seeking, an ancient, grey-stone hay barn standing in its own yard. The ground surrounding the building was water-logged already, but the barn itself was delightfully dry and fragrant. And into the barn, by dint of a good deal of manœuvring, they managed to back and manhandle both caravans. The cars were, perforce, left out in the open, which meant that the electric installation run from the engines could not be used. Hurricane lanterns proved but a poor substitute, and no cooking on Primus stoves was possible on account of the surrounding hay.

But, despite the fact that their supper had to come out of tins, and that everything was wet in the Hallidays' caravan, which had sprung a leak in several places, the barn was, at least, dry and warm, so that the whole party felt decidedly more cheerful as they settled down.

After supper Lady Fanshawe, less thoughtful than Mary, shook the crumbs from the table out on to the floor of the barn. A moment later a big brown rat appeared to garner this unexpected harvest. Like a flash of lightning, Pongo, Michael Halliday's Sealyham terrier, shot out of the caravan and made short work of the intruder.

"Oh, a rat! a rat!" squealed Mona Fanshawe. "For Heaven's sake let's get out of this place. I'm simply terrified of the beastly things."

"You might well be scared if we were in Africa," grinned Mike, "for, where there are rats, there are also snakes—in Africa—eh, Mary?"

His wife shuddered, for her husband's words had raised an unpleasantly vivid picture of life as she had lived it in an African grass hut. None the less her voice was steady as she answered:

"Pongo will look after any vermin that are likely to trouble us in this place. Won't you, old fellow?"

And the dog, hearing his name, lifted his gory muzzle and wagged his stump of a tail.

"Well, what are we going to do about sleeping?" interrupted Sir Edward, anxious to turn his wife's mind to other matters, and added: "I suppose, Mike, that you and I had better put up our camp beds among the hay, and then Mary and Mona can have our caravan."

"Do you think Hector will disturb you, Lady Fanshawe?" asked Mary doubtfully.

"Not a bit, my dear."

"Just listen to the rain, b'gad!" exclaimed Sir Edward. "I bet the yard will be knee deep in water by the morning. We're right under the shoulder of the hill and it looked like a water-shed when I shut the doors."

"Please goodness the magnetos on the cars won't be flooded when we want to start," Mike answered.

"Do you think there are many rats in this place?" Sir Edward queried, when the womenfolk had turned in.

"There are always a few in every barn," his friend answered, "but they've probably cleared out already, or will keep to their holes. Pongo has been busy ratting most of the evening. Good night."

"Good night," came the answer.

And down the narrow, manure-covered lane which led to the grey barn, a living stream came flowing, which looked, in the fitful light of the moon, like a black tidal wave. It was accompanied by eerie squeaks and angry twitterings and, so great was the pressure of that flitting, every moment some rodent, weaker than his fellows, was squeezed up on to the surface of the slowly-moving tide of rats.

Soon, save for the thresh of the rain upon the slate roof and the howling of the wind, interspersed by the snap and crackle of falling branches, silence reigned supreme. But still the living tide of rats flowed on towards the barn.

Once, during the night, Michael Halliday started up on his bed, startled from sleep by a long-drawn-out, slithering "Whoosh", which culminated in a dull thud and seemed to shake the building. He leaned over and shook his sleeping companion.

"Did you hear anything, Ted?" he queried.

"No, what was it?"

"I thought I heard a thud and that the building shook."

"Nonsense, man, that tinned lobster has given you indigestion."

Michael Halliday, half-convinced that he had been dreaming, lay down and went to sleep again. Had he but known it, a great slice of the hill overshadowing the barn, washed

from its ancient rock foundation, had slid down until stopped by the wall and door of the barn, which it had closed most effectually.

And still the black tide of rats, water-driven from the valleys, flowed on, seeking refuge from the storm.

Towards dawn the first fringes of the flitting flowed about the barn. The fact that the only door was blocked by a solid, immovable barrier of earth presented nothing worse than a temporary hindrance to them; there were plenty of holes and crannies through which so small a creature as a rat could enter. None the less, no more than one or two could find shelter from the storm immediately; and, indeed, the pressure of the rodents whose mass overflowed the yard and still stretched far back up the muddy lane, tended to frustrate the efforts of the first wave to effect an entry.

The Sealyham, even in his sleep, caught the scent of his hereditary enemies and awoke instantly to furious, barking life. The dog was chained to his master's bed and his sudden spring forward awakened Michael.

"Lie down and shut up, you old fool," he admonished, for he was annoyed at being awakened. The dog sank down, cowed by the anger in his master's voice.

Halliday fell once more into an uneasy sleep, for the dog lay trembling beside him, with half-suppressed growls rumbling continually deep down in his chest. The poor brute, in fact, was hard put to it to restrain his desire to bark, for the rats were pouring in faster and faster, and now the sleeping caravaners were, literally, ringed in by beady, watching eyes that glowed redly.

Then "something" fell with a dull "plop" from the roof ventilator to the floor of the caravan; a second and a third thud followed. Little Hector screamed as something scurried across his body, and instantly the two women in the caravan awakened.

Mary saw the red eyes first and she screamed and screamed again. There were dozens of these pin-points in the caravan already, while, in the barn itself, indescribable squeakings and rustlings in the hay had broken out immediately her scream was heard.

The dog started barking again, Mike Halliday sprang up

with a savage oath, and Sir Edward awakened trembling. Both women were screaming now, the child was crying hysterically, the squeaking and squealing of the rats grew louder, over all rose the shrieking of the gale, backed up by the dull, incessant bourdon of the falling rain.

Then the man from overseas saw the circle of evil red eyes that was closing in upon them—slowly, inch by stealthy inch.

“The door, Ted,” he shouted. “Get that damned door open. By God! the place is full of rats!”

For an instant the bright beam of an electric torch stabbed through the darkness. A solid black and brown wall of rats was creeping relentlessly forward from every angle of the building. The creatures in front strove frantically to retreat, as the white light focused and blinded their eyes; but there were millions of rats in that flitting. More and more rats poured into the barn every instant, fighting furiously to escape from the lashing rain and the rising water outside, so that sheer weight of numbers from the back drove the front ranks pitilessly forward.

Mike’s hand dived beneath his pillow, and the staccato chatter of the automatic pistol he snatched up let pandemonium loose, for dozens of bats that lived among the dusty roof’s beams overhead were disturbed and fluttered wildly to and fro.

Lady Fanshawe, leaping from the caravan, added maniacal screams and hysterical laughter to the general uproar when a bat became entangled in her hair and she felt her bare feet treading upon living rats, which bit cruelly into her bare ankles with needle-sharp teeth.

Mary, with her son in her arms, stood stock still, unable to move a step towards her husband, for she was literally engulfed to the knees by the tide of rodents. Then Pongo broke his lead and leapt to the aid of his mistress. In a moment she was free and moving towards Michael. But that was the end of the unfortunate dog. The rats literally flowed over him, squeaking, worrying, biting, and, within a minute, not a fragment, beyond his bones, was left.

“The door, why the hell don’t you open the door, Ted?” Michael shouted.

“I can’t, it’s stuck fast,” the answer was gasped back.

Then, in a rising scream: "Oh, God! I'm up to my waist in rats. I'm being eaten alive!"

Again Mike's hand foraged beneath his pillow, found a new clip and slipped it into the butt of his automatic. And, if the eight shots availed not at all against the rats, the quick series of explosions did, at least, serve to awaken a number of farm-hands and villagers, living in cottages close at hand.

They came to the rick-yard, armed with lanterns, and fled away again in search of dogs and sticks and shotguns, for they had seen two things: firstly, that the yard was literally carpeted with the remains of a great flitting of rats, such a flitting as men had never known before; and, secondly, that a low hill, standing in the yard, had subsided, owing to the rain, completely blocking the only road of escape for the unfortunate caravaners who were thus imprisoned in the barn.

By this time the screams of the baronet had given place to silence, for the rats had pulled him down and he would scream no more. Lady Fanshawe, fainting from sheer terror, had felt her knees sag and had sunk into that living black tide from which there could be no rescue.

But Mike Halliday, big game hunter and explorer, who had faced a hundred perils clear-eyed and fearless in his time, put out all his mighty strength and, heaving up his whole light bedstead, literally flailed his way to a spot where he could get his back against a wall, with space enough behind him for Mary to crouch in, holding Hector.

The light of his torch was growing dim now, his last clip of cartridges was finished, but he wedged the base of his torch into a crevice of the wall, twisted the legs of his broken bed into a serviceable weapon for his great hands and fought on so long as the light lasted.

Meanwhile, the men outside had purged the yard, and willing hands were digging frantically to clear the door, while shouts of encouragement came to the ears of the man who was fighting grimly for his own life and the lives of his wife and child.

Already a mat of dead rodents lay deep about his feet, but, ever and ever, as he fought, fresh rats swarmed over the corpses of their kind to attack him. Rats sprang at him from either side and even dropped from the roof and walls on to

his limbs, until there was hardly an inch of the man that was not bleeding.

Then, in ones and twos at first, and then in dozens, they stole past him, as his strength began to fail.

Mary knew their case was hopeless and made no attempt to fight. This brave woman crouched down, with her body covering her child, and let the foul brutes work their will upon her. The quiet fortitude of that mother is something to marvel at. Long before her husband was finished, the thin pyjamas were literally eaten from her body, and then tiny, razor-sharp teeth began nibbling tentatively at her living flesh. The temptation to scream, to kick and strike, anything to drive away that awful agony and the loathsome touch of small, furry bodies, was almost irresistible. But Mary knew that any overt act upon her part would bring the whole swarm of the rats surging over her. And so she endured the last, utmost limit of agony in silence and stillness. For already the heavy blows of axe-strokes were falling upon the door, which the caravaners' own hands had barred that night upon the inside, and every second that she endured brought nearer the fulfilment of her hope that Hector might be saved unharmed, for, covered as he was by his mother's body, the child had, as yet, received no injury.

But rats are swift workers. The blood, flowing freely from the woman's many wounds, the red "meat" they had already eaten, inflamed, to the last degree, their carnivorous passions, while the smell of blood set the rear-most ranks, that, as yet, had had no share in the fearful feast, surging forward; and, before the great double doors were beaten in, the last shred of that once beautiful woman and most faithful mother, Mary Halliday, had disappeared.

And the child? The rats had fed red, too, upon his little body when the eager rescuers broke in, and already the flitting was fading away, as such comings do mysteriously pass, through crack and cranny and crevice; and, outside, men killed rats until their arms ached from wrist to shoulder with striking. But still the noxious creatures fled away, leaving behind them no trace of the victims they had slain, save little heaps of bones, two deserted caravans, and a broken camp bedstead.

At the coming of the dawn the rain ceased and the sun shone out, but all was gloom in Berkeley. And, when the Coroner had finished his inquiries, the farmer bade his men pull down the grey barn, stone by stone, and burn the hay. For, as he said, after such a happening the place, if it was allowed to stand, must be for ever after both haunted and accursed.

## The Idol of Death

RICHARD JACKSON & A. EDWARDS CHAPMAN

"BAD luck is prophesied to each seventh owner of the idol," I murmured with an incredulous smile; "and I am the seventh!"

Beauclare, a pale, dark-eyed Frenchman, stared at me keenly. My acquaintance with him was not of very long duration, nor had I any knowledge of his antecedents. He had been casually introduced to me by a brother collector, and on learning of my priceless Japanese water-colour paintings, had shown himself intensely interested and expressed a desire that I would let him see them. I must admit that I was not particularly impressed with the fellow; there was at times a strange furtiveness about his black eyes that gave one the idea that he was thinking about one thing when saying something entirely different. His knowledge of antique treasures, however, was clearly so extensive, and his enthusiasm so genuine, that with that ready good-fellowship that distinguishes hobbyists the world over I had invited him to call on me and inspect my collection of which I was mighty proud, I assure you.

Now he took his astonished gaze from me and sat staring at the little clay image in his hand, to which I had so lightly referred.

"What, Monsieur Chapman," he exclaimed in his high-toned, effeminate voice, "you have actually become the owner—the seventh owner of a thing with so evil a reputation?"

"Who could resist such a wonderful bargain?" I replied with a laugh. "It was going dirt cheap!"

"Was it not foolish of your antique dealer to buy it," questioned Beauclare, "knowing that as he was the sixth owner, the next buyer, as the possible victim of the curse, would be unwilling to pay more than a fraction of what it is worth?"

"He said that Brompton, who sold it to him, informed him that he was only the fifth purchaser," I explained.

"And then he found out his mistake later, eh?"

"Yes. Shenstone—that is my dealer's name—conducted a little investigation on his own account, and found that five people had previously owned it. He never expected to sell it. Nearly had a fit when I said I'd take the risk!"

Beauclare again turned his attention to the image. A figure of malevolent aspect, it gazed cynically at the world from two empty eye-sockets. With its arms folded and its legs crossed, it seemed to be waiting philosophically for the end of time.

"If you turn it over," I said, "you will see the prophetic writing."

Beauclare looked intently at the ideographic script on the base of the image.

"Yes, I see it," he stated, "but though I cannot read it, I know its meaning, so long have I been interested in the image."

"But not interested enough to risk becoming a seventh owner, eh?" I laughed.

"But no!" exclaimed Beauclare with a shudder. "I would not run headlong into such danger! Listen. This is how the writing goes. No?

"Woe to him who first becomes my master! His blood shall flow as the petals drop from the chrysanthemums. . . . In the fertile valley of the Central-Land-of-Reed-Plains I hunted and died. . . . There is a gap here. . . . turned to clay. As I am kind hereafter, only each Seventh Master shall be sick with evil. Woe! Woe to him who shall be seventh!"

"That's right," I agreed; "every word. Rot, isn't it?"

"I do not think so," Beauclare declared seriously. "Much though I should like to own the idol, I would not for the world have become a seventh owner of it. My friend, I beseech you do not tamper with the powers of darkness! Rid yourself of the idol ere the dread curse falls upon you! See! I will take it off you. I will buy it!"

There was such an eager, covetous gleam in his dark eyes as he said this that I may be forgiven for suspecting that

it was more than concern for my safety that prompted his offer.

"Thank you. That is very kind of you," I said dryly.  
"But it's mine and I intend to keep it, curse or no curse!"

I placed the image on the bureau where it had previously rested.

"Let's have done with this rot!" I exclaimed. "You came to inspect my water-colours. Don't you want to see them?"

"*Oui, oui!* Please show me them!" Beauclare cried eagerly. "I forget when you bring the image how passionately I wanted to look at them!"

I strode to the library, leaving the door slightly ajar. Opening a small safe that was concealed behind the bookcase, I took out the large flat box that contained my priceless paintings. Closing the safe again, I turned to go back to the room in which I had left Beauclare. As I entered I almost bumped into the Frenchman, who was apparently on the point of coming into the library. He started suddenly as he saw me, and uttered a slight, high-pitched, nervous laugh.

"A thousand pardons, monsieur," he apologized, "for this intrusion. But no, I could not stay in that place alone—it is like a morgue! Let us talk in the library."

I laughed with him at his fears, but none the less readily fell in with his wishes, for, to tell the truth, the room is so cluttered with quaint antiques and curios from all over the world as to bear more resemblance to a museum than a drawing-room.

"These are by that noted Japanese master, Kose nō Kanaoka," I explained, exhibiting several of the water-colours.

Beauclare gazed raptly at the paintings. His whole mind seemed to be concentrated on them, so that he apparently lost all sense of time: all realization of my presence. And I admit that this pleased me greatly, for the paintings certainly were worth looking at, and the getting of them had cost me much effort and money. Presently, however, he roused himself and stared vaguely at me as a man waking from a trance.

"*Ma foi!* but they are wonderful!" he exclaimed. "How can words express their splendour!"

"Glad you like them," I answered.

"Like them!" he cried, his eyes glittering. "I covet them! I will buy them from you. You will not deny me? What is your price? Let it be what it will, I will pay it!"

"Sorry, Beauclare, they are not for sale," I answered, much gratified by his eager admiration. "My whole life has been spent in getting together this collection. There is not its equal in the world!"

Beauclare shrugged his shoulders resignedly, and resumed his contemplation of the paintings. Suddenly the clock in the hall broke the silence.

"Tu-whit, tu-whoo—tu-whit, tu-whoo. . . ."

"What a strange clock is that!" exclaimed Beauclare, rousing himself. "What time does it strike?"

"Yes, it's an owl clock—rather rare," I replied. "It's striking twelve."

"Twelve, did you say? I must leave you then. Some other time I will come and bargain with you. But take care. That evil image—I would not be in your shoes for much! Do not run so great a risk, monsieur. Sell it to me while there is time!"

"I mean to keep it—it's not for sale!" I said decidedly, for the fellow's persistence began to irritate me. "I wouldn't miss the pleasure of the curse's acquaintance for anything!"

"*Mon Dieu!*" ejaculated Beauclare. "You are foolish. You are in a grave position!"

"Pish!" I laughed. "Pardon me, I will accompany you to the door. My valet is away for the night, and the house-keeper has retired."

When Beauclare had gone I shut and locked the front door and returned to the library. Lighting a cigarette, I settled myself in my favourite arm-chair for a comfortable smoke before retiring. My thoughts, unbidden, ran on that little clay image and the awful fate that was said to lie in store for the unfortunate seventh owner. I was well acquainted, of course, with the various grim tragedies that marked its history; but they were purely coincidental. The tragedies would have taken place in any event. Yet even as I sceptically told myself this I found myself wondering whether there might possibly be something in the strange prophecy of the

idol. What if those tragedies had not been coincidences? What if the image really were possessed of some malign, some uncanny, power? What if—

At this point I abruptly broke off these foolish thoughts and got to my feet.

“Bah!” I snorted, throwing my half-consumed cigarette into the fireplace. “You’re a fool! Get off to bed!”

Switching off the light, I went slowly to my room and turned into bed. I tried to sleep, but sleep would not come to me. The whole house seemed oppressed with an intense gloom. The air was very still. Silence, like that of the tomb, lay over everything save the clock. Defying that deathly silence, it ticked weakly. Then came a screech:

“Tu-whit, tu-whoo—tu-whit, tu-whoo.”

Two o’clock.

For some time longer I lay painfully awake, listening to the endless ticking of the clock. Then at last I fell into a restless sleep during which my mind became a chaos of Beauclares, evil, gloating, clay images, and strange, distorted characters from my water-colours all mixed inextricably into a formless confusion.

“Tu-whit, tu-whoo,” began the owl clock again, rousing me sharply from this troubled rest. Then came a clattering bump, breaking off the chimes abruptly.

Instantly I was wide awake. Something apparently had fallen downstairs. I slid complainingly from the bed, and putting on my dressing-gown and slippers, went from the room and down the gloomy stairs. Arriving at the bottom, I switched on the light. Then I saw what had been the cause of my awakening. The little owl clock had seemingly torn from its fastenings on the wall and now lay on the floor, a crumpled, twisted wreckage.

As I gazed with annoyance at the now useless fragments I thought I heard a slight sound coming from the room on my left opposite the library, and I hastened through the open door, my mind running on burglars and such-like gentry. I shot a swift, inquiring glance around, and as my eyes came to rest on the curtained window I seemed to detect some stealthy movement amongst the shadows that enshrouded it. I sprang forward. Then like a ray of sunshine the headlights

of a motor-car illumined the room, revealing only the curtain fluttering limply in the slight draught that came through the crevices of the ill-fitting window.

"You're imagining things!" I told myself with a slight laugh. "It's only the clock—hang it!"

I switched off the light, and, dismissing the matter from my mind, went back to bed and was presently fast asleep.

When, next morning, I awoke and dressed with more difficulty than usual, I went downstairs, grumbling that my valet would not be back until later. After breakfast, which had been excellently prepared by my estimable housekeeper, and which did much to restore my good humour, I went into the library.

The first thing that attracted my attention was the fact that the window was wide open. I tried to remember whether I had opened it the night before, but could not decide. I was puzzling over this when my glance alighted on the bureau on which the little clay image usually rested. To my alarm the figure was not there. At this a sudden suspicion rushed upon me and I apprehensively crossed over to my concealed safe and opened it. My worst fears were realized. The water-colours were missing.

I called in the housekeeper and hurriedly questioned her; but she professed entire ignorance. She had slept soundly the previous night and had heard nothing amiss. On getting up she had noticed the open window, but concluded that I had left it open, as I had more than once carelessly done.

Without further delay I telephoned for the police and waited anxiously for them to call. After what seemed an interminable period, but what actually could not have been more than half an hour, a police-detective arrived. I made him acquainted with the happenings of the past night and the discovery of the open window.

"Of course, I *may* have opened it," I pointed out.

"Maybe, maybe, sir," remarked the detective in non-committal tones, and continued his investigation.

He examined the room with a great show of efficiency, and asked many seemingly useless questions which I answered with as much patience as I could muster. After interrogating the housekeeper very closely the officer announced that he

had no more to say, and declared himself to be satisfied that the thief would soon be apprehended and the paintings restored. I did not feel quite so sanguine myself; but I made no comment, and the detective departed.

For a time I wandered aimlessly about the room, and presently came to a stand by the window through which the bright rays of the morning sun streamed. As I gazed vacantly out into the quiet street of dignified Georgian houses, a sudden glitter of something in the folds of the curtain attracted my attention. It was the half of a gold cuff-link caught in the dusty lace-work. I disentangled the broken link and examined it closely. Cunningly inlaid with bright enamels was a fire-breathing dragon with two heads.

"So much for the police observation!" I muttered.

As I thought thus there came a ring at the door and, thinking that maybe it was the detective, I hastened to answer, preparing a scathing comment in my mind. The visitor proved to be not the detective, however, but Shenstone, whom I have previously mentioned as my dealer, and from whom I had purchased that little clay image. He was a thin, stoop-shouldered elderly man with a keen face and quick, dark eyes.

"Oh, it's you," I said disappointedly. "Come in."

"It's about that image I sold you, Mr. Chapman," began Shenstone, entering. "It—"

"Don't bother me about the thing now," I said irritably. "There's more serious matters on hand."

In answer to his eager questions, I described the events of the previous night and my loss.

"A smart man the police sent!" I concluded. "He missed the only promising clue!"

I held out the broken cuff-link for Shenstone's inspection. A quick exclamation escaped the dealer's lips, and he stared from the link to me with a curious expression on his face.

"Why, it's part of a pair I sold to the Count D'Auvergne. There's not another pair like them to my knowledge. Very rare Japanese workmanship, they are, and he was desperately anxious to get them. He—"

"This count—who is he?" I demanded sharply. "How do his links come here?"

"Well, I don't know very much about him," Shenstone admitted. "He's a pretty good customer. He says he is in touch with all the leading families in Europe and a great friend of Lord—"

"If this is part of the links you sold him," I interrupted, "he should be able to give an accounting of them. I must trouble you for his address."

"I'll take you to see him," volunteered Shenstone. "He must have sold the links—although it's strange, he was so keen about them. Still, he'll put us on the right track."

"I rather think he will!" I agreed significantly. "Come on. I'll get the car."

Soon we were speeding towards the district in which stood the small private hotel where Shenstone said the count resided.

"I came to your house, Mr. Chapman," began Shenstone, "about that image I sold you."

"Don't talk to me about it, please," I cut him short, and fell into a moody silence.

So Shenstone held his peace, and after a while we arrived at our destination and I pulled up outside a little, unpossessing building that was hardly what one expected as the residence of a French nobleman. A sleepy-looking porter told us that "his honour's" room was on the first floor.

In the absence of an elevator, we climbed the stairs until we came at last to the room we desired. Shenstone knocked twice, but there was no answer. He turned the knob and opened the door, calling in an apologetic voice; but there came no reply. He pushed open the door farther, while I, following close behind him, peered over his shoulder.

Then we stopped on the threshold, transfixed with a sudden horror.

"My God!" Shenstone ejaculated. "Look there!"

Lying face downwards on the worn, faded carpet was the body of a man, a crumpled, shapeless heap. Shenstone sprang into the room with me at his heels. He turned over the body with trembling hands, and his face went white. A strangled exclamation burst involuntarily from his lips.

"The Count D'Auvergne!"

I gave one glance at the dead man's face, which was terribly

contorted into such an expression of horror, of fearful anticipation, that I recoiled from it.

"Beauclare!" I cried amazedly.

There came a silence, a dreadful, nerve-wracking silence, during which Shenstone examined the body hurriedly and fearfully.

"Heart failure," he said in hushed, shaky tones.

He rose slowly to his feet and allowed his keen, inquisitive eyes to search the room.

"Good gracious, your water-colours!" he gasped, lifting the paintings from a chest-of-drawers.

I did not move from where I stood looking fixedly at the lifeless figure.

"Look! The image!" I cried, pointing to the sprawling hand of the dead man.

Tightly clasped in the stiffened fingers was the little image of ill-omen. From this my glance flashed to the cuff that encircled the wrist. Dangling from the button-hole was half of a link inlaid with a two-headed, fire-breathing dragon. Shenstone had seen it also.

"See, see," he exclaimed excitedly. "The link!"

I did not answer. I was staring fixedly at the cynically-leering image, a strange flood of wild ideas shocking my consciousness.

"God knows but that there might be something in the prophecy of the image!" I muttered at length. "B-but I was the seventh owner, and yet that poor devil has had the bad luck!"

Shenstone turned upon me swiftly.

"You?" he cried. "No, no! I tried to tell you before, but you would not listen."

"Eh?" I exclaimed in sharp inquiry. "What d'you mean?"

"That fool of a clerk of mine," said Shenstone in a subdued voice, "made a mistake."

"About the image?" I demanded.

"About the image. He only informed me this morning that the thing came straight from Meunier. Brompton was only acting as agent. The image was never in his possession."

"Then," I cried, pointing to the still figure, my voice strained with horror, "*he was the seventh!*"



# The Grey Killer

EVERIL WORRELL

*Narrative and Diary of Marion Wheaton, Patient in R—  
Hospital from November 15 to November 28, 1928.*

SUCH terrible things are happening here that I feel the need to set them down, as I dare not speak to anyone of my thoughts and of my fears. I will go back and begin at the beginning, a few nights ago. Later, if there is more to be written—God grant there may not be!—I will continue this narrative as a diary.

It began three nights ago—and this is the twenty-sixth of November. The red light in the corridor outside my door burned like an eye lit with an ugly menace. In the dead of night bells sounded intermittently—the shrill ringing of the telephone, or the rasping buzzer that could mean so many things. Cold, and the need to borrow strength to spread a blanket within finger-tip reach. Night loneliness and night terrors; fear of the known and of the unknown; fear of a stabbing agony called life and of a veiled release called death. Terror of pain. And in the shut-in private rooms and in the bare, orderly wards, that hydra-headed horror of a hospital—pain itself.

I, too, was in pain. A rusty nail had gone through the thin sole of my slipper and torn a gash in my foot which nearly ended in blood poisoning. And on the night of November twenty-third I lay tossing in my hot bed, feeling the burning lances of flame shoot upward from the horribly swollen foot.

Lying so, I had the horrors, rather. I was not out of the woods, not by a long shot. My foot might mend rapidly, or it might yet take a sudden turn for the worse, in which case I should leave this narrow room only for a narrower one. The woman across the hall, who had had her fourth operation

for cancer, would be leaving so, perhaps, and would, I believed, be glad to go. Her broken moans had seemed to tell me that. And there was a man down the corridor who groaned. . . .

Well, I wished it were over and I were well, and safely out of the place. And in the meantime the bed-covers were too heavy and were burning me up, adding needlessly to my tortures.

I rang my bell, and listened to its dull, rasping sound in the distance. In some hospitals only a light flashed on a signal board and over your door—better arrangement, I'd say.

I waited for Miss Larcom or Miss Wurt. Miss Larcom would seem glad to see me—she would make me feel better and think of little extra things to do for me. Miss Wurt would snap at me, cross at having had to put down her novel. And she would do as little as she could, and very likely drag the covers roughly over that fiendish foot of mine. But if Miss Wurt were on the floor to-night, I should likely have to ring again.

I waited. It didn't do to ring again too soon. Then Miss Wurt would be certain to let those covers saw across my foot—or was that one of those sick, invalid fancies of which one hears? Still, all nurses aren't alike, and they aren't all angels.

I waited, and heard an unfamiliar footstep, that seemed to slide a little—not to shuffle but to slide, as a serpent would slide on hard ground or on a hard floor. Why did a coldness strike me then, that made me draw closer the covers that had irked me? And why did a sudden vivid conscious love of life and of the earth on which my days were spent sweep over me? I was afraid of the *emptiness* outside this world I knew; a realization of the vacant chasm of space swept my soul. Was it death I feared in that moment, or had I an instinctive prescience of strange Things—real, but unknown?

Sick terrors of a hospital night! I fixed my gaze unwaveringly on the doorway. Mustn't let Miss Wurt catch me looking or acting goofy. It would be fun for her to recommend me to the psychopathic ward. (No, of course I didn't think that seriously; of course I was just being an imaginative sick person.)

At any rate, my whole attention was on the dim-lit oblong of my door. The footsteps that sounded, somehow, so unusual, paused before a figure was framed there; not, however, before one of the feet that made the sliding sound was visible. There it was, for a few moments, alone: the end of a shoe that seemed enormously long. Then the figure caught up with the foot—not Miss Wurt or Miss Larcom, but a man.

A man dressed in grey. A man whose *face* (in the half-light, at least) was grey. Whose face, whose form, whose way of walking, I—didn't like. My fingers sought the bell cord.

Before they found it, however, the room was flooded with light. That seemed reassuring, somehow, and I was ashamed of my panic—my flightiness I ought perhaps to call it.

In a hospital you get used to people going and coming, surprising you when you're awake, surprising you when you're asleep. Strange nurses with thermometers happen in every day; strange house doctors now and then. I didn't need his statement now to fit him in.

"I'm Dr. Zingler, the new house doctor. Haven't seen you before. I have heard you had a hard time with your foot. I came because I heard your bell, and the nurse did not answer. Miss Wurt—I will send her, though I am afraid she moves slowly. In the meantime, if it is pain, I can help you."

In a reaction from the fantastic fear that had laid hold on me, I smiled warmly up at the strangely pallid face. Greyish skin, sunken cheeks, hollow, *hungry* eyes, and a strange, deathly immobility of feature—if an attractive personality was necessary to success, the new house doctor was foredoomed to failure. Yet his professional manner was good enough, though somehow rather strange, too. Suave and smooth, but—indescribably queer.

I smiled, with an effort.

"Pain—yes, my foot hurts," I answered him, trying to make light of it. "But I rang for Miss Wurt merely to have her turn back the top coverings, to cool my foot, especially. I feel as though it were roasting over red-hot coals."

The ill-favoured face looking down on me seemed to attempt a smile of sympathy.

"Miss Wurt will be able to make you more comfortable, no doubt," it promised. "But I think I can do more—I think I can ensure you sleep for the remainder of the night. I'll just give you a hypodermic."

A wave of gratitude swept over me. I'd had a few brief intervals of forgetfulness when the pain was greatest by the administration of a hypo; lately these had been discontinued. Complete oblivion for a few hours would be welcome now.

I watched Dr. Zingler as he busied himself with a small box and its contents, which he took from a pocket; did the man carry hypodermics and opiates always like this, ready for instant use? Generally the doctors rang for a nurse. . . .

The hypodermic, held in a bony, long-fingered hand of the same unholy colour as Dr. Zingler's face, moved toward me. I glanced at it, idly, baring my arm for the merciful prick. It was near my face as I looked at it. Heavens, how strange! Or was it due to fever that every little happening of this night took on a grotesque significance? Be that as it may, the appearance of the liquid in the hollow glass tube was violently repulsive to me: a viscid, slimy-looking, yellowish-white, with an overtone of that same grey colour that made the hand holding it look like the hand of a corpse. At the same moment an odour assailed my nostrils: a putrescent aroma of decay; the very essence of death embodied in a smell.

The needle was approaching my arm when I drew away from it—hurled myself from it, rather, forgetful of my foot, crouching in the far corner of my narrow hospital bed like a trapped animal at bay.

"No, no!" I cried, my voice rising queerly. "I won't take it, I'm not in pain, I need nothing! I'll ring, I'll scream! I'll arouse the whole floor!"

The grey doctor—so I thought of him and shall always think of him—withdrew his hand, an expression of extreme contempt stamping his immobile features.

"Of course, if you prefer to bear your pain!" he shrugged. "Though it hardly needed such vehemence. There's a ward for patients like you where the walls are thicker. As to arousing *this* floor, I think you've succeeded in your humane endeavour. Listen!"

I listened. God forgive me, I had succeeded. The woman with the cancer was moaning pitifully—but for the opiates given her so heavily she would doubtless be shrieking. Down the hall the man with the grievous hurt was groaning, delirious too:

"Mary, you've come at last! Oh, no, nurse, it's only you! She died in the accident—I remember," he wailed. And then, again: "Oh, Mary, at last!"

Also the little boy who had had a tonsillectomy done yesterday was screaming down the hall, hoarse, half-intelligible words.

I buried my head beneath the covers in an agony of shame as I heard the sliding step of the doctor withdrawing. Through my door it passed and across the hall, and I heard the familiar hinge of the cancer patient's door creak. Well, perhaps he could quiet her, the new doctor. What had been the matter with me, anyway? Had I been mad?

Another footstep approached my door, a well-known footstep. Miss Wurt's healthy, round, red face appeared like an unamiable harvest moon. She fixed my covers, not so roughly as I had feared, and stood ready to depart. "That all?" she suggested hopefully.

"Almost," I said, detaining her with an urgent gesture. "But tell me—is Dr. Zingler often on the floor at night? He's—a queer-looking man, is he not?"

The red of Miss Wurt's face deepened to a mild purple. Some attraction between her and the new doctor, on her side at least, that was certain. Then my remark had been undiplomatic.

It had.

"I've never heard any of the patients comment on Dr. Zingler's personal appearance," she said in icy reproof.

I was glad to drop the subject. Next morning, however, I had a real surprise.

Miss Edgeworth, my day nurse, was a friendly girl, who had fallen into a habit of gossiping with me about the people and happenings around the hospital. After the night I hailed her coming with relief. I'd even dare tell her if I chose, I thought, that the new house doctor gave me the horrors.

"Have you seen Dr. Zingler?" I began tentatively as she wet my wash cloth, preparatory to washing my face.

"Dr. Zingler?" she answered with a quick look of pleasure and what appeared to be a blush. "He's the kind that makes the grind go easier. Handsome, too, isn't he? Or have you seen him?"

"Yes—" I hesitated. "I've seen him."

I said no more. Surely he must hypnotize the nurses. That grey pallor, those mask-like features—handsome! I turned my face to the wall and lay brooding. My foot was better to-day. I had leisure to wonder if I need feel graver concern for my mind. Last night was a nightmare, and the new "handsome" doctor a hideous ghoul! No, no—what was I thinking? Things that weren't possible! Had I fallen victim to an obsession, a hallucination?

The greater part of the morning I brooded. And then I heard something that made me forget myself.

The house doctor whom I was accustomed to see on his daily rounds, Dr. Rountree, called a little after three. Like Nurse Edgeworth, he occasionally stayed for a short chat. To-day, however, I knew at once that he had something important on his mind—something, perhaps, which he hesitated to speak of.

"Have you heard the news about that cancer patient you've been grieving so over?" he began.

*"The cancer case!"*

I think there was horror in my voice. In my mind was a picture of a grey figure stalking, *sliding* in at the door behind which those hopeless moans were uttered. I think I was prepared for something gruesome, something incredibly awful, certainly not for Dr. Rountree's next words.

"It's something like a miracle, it seems," he said. "You know, we don't talk about these things, but this case was really hopeless. There couldn't have been another operation; and the thing still was gnawing at her vitals. Well! It was a case for increasing opiates until the end, with the opiates losing their power to alleviate. You've heard her moaning in spite of them. But to-day! Have you heard her? Listen!"

I listened. No, it was true, I had not heard her. The man down the corridor still groaned. The little boy who had lost his tonsils did not cry so much. The cancer patient had been silent all the morning, as she was now.

Again I felt a recurrence of my first horror.

"Not—dead!" The word one hates even to think of in a hospital.

But Dr. Rountree shook his head and made a quick gesture with his hand that he used in moments of great enthusiasm. "Oh, no, no!" he said quickly. "So much better that we've discontinued all opiates. Fully conscious and out of pain. A miracle, positively. She had an opiate last night, she says, though it isn't down on her chart. She was semi-conscious and didn't know who gave it to her, but she had that one—and hasn't needed one since. And she's stronger, too; the mere cessation of pain, I suppose, has given her the will to live. If it goes on this way, her wound will heal and she'll go out in two weeks' time, a well woman. I've never heard of such a thing!"

"Dr. Zingler went into her room. He had wanted to give me an opiate and must have given her hers," I said. "He's—rather hard to look at, isn't he?"

Dr. Rountree's face showed puzzlement.

"Didn't know Zingler was on last night, but he'd leave the opiates to the nurses, I should think," he said shortly. "He'll have the patients expecting the doctors to wash their faces for them next. As to looks, you're the first girl I've heard express a contrary opinion. Most of the nurses seem to think he's an Atlantic City beauty."

I tried during the rest of the long day to be glad of my neighbour's good fortune. I could not. I could only think with a kind of shrinking dread of the "handsome" Dr. Zingler slipping in at her door in the dead of night.

Of course it was only coincidence that the grey doctor had administered the woman's last opiate, and that the next day she had been so miraculously better. Only coincidence. Nevertheless, I inconsistently told myself that I would rather die than be miraculously cured by Dr. Zingler.

Night came.

Again the red light in the darkened hall loomed sinister, ominous, and the shadows it gave were macabre. My foot was better to-night—still a tortured thing of fire and anguish, yet definitely better. If I had rung for a sedative which I had had upon request several times, I might have slept. But I didn't want to sleep, though I knew that sleep was necessary to my recovery. I had a horror of sleeping and waking to see a long, narrow foot pressing the threshold of my door—to see a grey figure creeping in at that door.

I would have given worlds to be able to lock my door on the inside. Since that was impossible I had it left open as usual, and kept my eye on the dull red oblong of light.

Hour after hour. The man down the hall was groaning now—groaning in delirium, raving of the accident that brought him here. Not an auto smash, but a derailed train. I'd read of it. Only a few passengers hurt, but this man's wife, Mary, had been killed. He was crying her name out loud again, calling to her.

His groans—they hurt. Hospital nights! Awfulness of pain. Oh, why didn't someone hear and go to him? Miss Wurt on duty again, of course, and reading in whatever quiet corner she spent her nights. If she heard the groans, she didn't care. Oh, *why didn't someone go?*

And then I knew someone was going. For I heard footsteps, and they were the slow, sliding steps of Dr. Zingler. A door opened and shut. After a while, the groaning was cut off suddenly, as though a sound-proof wall had intervened.

Then I lay listening, till, after a long time, those sliding footsteps crept into the corridor. No sound, now, from the man who had groaned, as they retreated—going in the opposite direction from my door, thank God!

And still not another sound from the man who had groaned. The sufferer might have had his throat cut.

Next morning, however:

"You'd never imagine the things that are going on in this hospital!" Miss Edgeworth cried as she brought my morning thermometer. "Too bad *you* haven't come in for a miracle. You're mending, but slowly. Not like the case across the hall, I mean, or the railroad accident."

"The man from the railroad wreck—oh, what became of him?" My voice was sharp with anxiety, and Miss Edgeworth showed surprise and a little disapproval.

"You're guessing wrong when you ask what's 'become of' him in *that* tone!" she said. "What's 'become of' him is that an almost hopeless spine condition is miraculously improved. He is out of pain. He can move his legs under the covers and we thought they'd always be like fallen logs. That's what's 'become of' him!"

I turned my face to the wall, because I couldn't smile, couldn't show the decent human emotion of pleasure at another's merciful reprieve. Why couldn't I? Because my mind could imagine just one thing: the sound of those horrible, sliding footsteps last night, the picture I had visualized then of a lanky form and a grey death's-head creeping in at the delirious man's door—creeping out, leaving silence behind him.

What kind of opiate did the new doctor dispense that not only alleviated pain, but cured everything from cancer to an injured back? Well, of course, there was no connection; if there were, I should be honouring the grey doctor as a worker of miracles. But I didn't. I felt a greater horror of him than ever—and that horror extended itself now to the two who had so strangely recovered after his midnight visits.

Not for all the gold in the mint would I have entered the room of the cancer patient, or the room of the man who had been in the railroad wreck.

The next two nights I slept heavily. My foot was improving more rapidly, and I was worn out with pain and with night vigils. True, I closed my eyes with a sense of surrounding peril of some queer, undreamable kind, but I closed them nevertheless, and opened them only as the winter dawn crept in at my windows. And on the second morning I think I must have given Miss Edgeworth a real shock.

She had merely mentioned the little boy who had his tonsils out.

"Rodney Pennings—the little tonsillectomy case—" she began.

I caught her arm in a grip that must have hurt.

"Has *he* had a sudden strange improvement?" I asked in a tone that rang unpleasantly in my own ears.

Miss Edgeworth drew her arm away from me and passed the fingers of her other hand speculatively over her sleeve.

"I think you've bruised me, Miss Wheaton," she said reprovingly; "I must speak to the head nurse for a sedative for you. I don't know why you should be so dreadfully nervous, now your foot's doing so well. As for little Rodney Penning—I don't understand your question. Of course he's improved. Many children leave the hospital on the day of a tonsillectomy. Little Rodney is going home to-morrow."

I can hardly write of the horror of that to-morrow. I can hear yet the screams of little Rodney's mother—when little Rodney went home.

The little lad had cried pitifully after the operation on his throat. That wound had been agony for a child to bear. But the making of it was merciful: *that* cutting had been done under anæsthesia. There was no anæsthetic when the little boy's newly-healed throat was neatly cut from the outside, so that his head was nearly severed from the trunk, and a great pool of blood had washed with red, as though a careless painter had smeared his paints, the skylight over the operating-room. The skylight? Yes, that was where the body was found, a shapeless black blob against the wan-starred sky of early dawn.

But the worst thing of all I have not yet written down. The worst thing of all was also the thing in which lay the greatest mystery.

Surely little Rodney Penning had been done to death by a mad fiend, for his body was transfixated with a needle-shaped bar of iron, bearing on the pointed end a barb suggestive of the barb of a fish-hook. And to the blunter end of the bar appended a fine but strong steel cord. It was as if some maniac obsessed with the harmless sport of fishing had played at using human bait. Only, if so, scarce half a mile from the hospital pounded the surf of the Atlantic. So why did he choose the hospital roof to carry out his grim travesty?

Writing this has turned me quite sick. If it had not been for this horror, I would soon be able to leave the hospital—

and to tell the truth, I have conceived a horror of the whole place. The condition of my own foot now permits me to get around on crutches. But they say, and my doctor says, that I am too nearly in a state of nervous collapse to permit of my discharge. And besides, an eruption has appeared on my body which has resulted from my near approach to blood-poisoning, and which they say requires observation. I am on a special diet, and everyone is particularly thoughtful and considerate—even Miss Wurt. But I do not see how I can get any better with this horror clutching at my heart.

They didn't mean to tell me, of course. But I had heard the screams of little Rodney's mother, and wormed the truth out of black Hannah, who brings the patients' trays. I was hysterical then, and from something the house doctor who is my friend, Dr. Rountree, said to me, I must have said some terrible things about Dr. Zingler. Dr. Rountree's eyes are dark and very deep, and can be very kindly and pitiful, and I know that he meant me to take what he said very seriously.

"Don't speak of your feeling about Dr. Zingler, Miss Wheaton, to *anyone*. Much better yet, never speak of Dr. Zingler at all."

I wish I had friends in this city. I wish I could be moved at once to another hospital. I don't seem quite able to arrange such a thing from inside. I spoke of it to my doctor, who is a great specialist, and so of course very impersonal. His eyes narrowed as he answered me, and I knew that he was studying me—regarding me as a case, and not as a human being.

"I can't order all my patients out of the hospital because of the most awful occurrence that has given you the horrors, Miss Wheaton, for I don't attribute it to any negligence on the part of the hospital officials. None of the other patients know of this thing. You gossip too much, ask too many questions for your own good, inquire too much into the goings on around the hospital. Then I must add to that an unfortunate tendency on your part to take personal dislikes, and most unreasonable ones. Not, for instance, that it injures Dr. Zingler to have you conceive an abhorrence for him—not, even, that it discredits him that you should accuse him

in a hysterical fit and utterly without reason, of being the fiend killer. No, it only does *you harm.*"

The lecture went on. I turned my face to the wall. When the head nurse came in, a person who seems to have considerable authority, I said meekly that I would like to be moved to another hospital. She said only:

"There, there! Dr. Smythe-Burns wants you to stay here. We'll have you feeling more like yourself before long. And Dr. Smythe-Burns orders your nightly sedative continued. We'll have no more midnight blues."

*Tuesday, November 26.*

For all that, I had a nightmare last night.

I dreamed, most realistically, that I lay in the half-stupor which bridges, under a heavy sedative, the awful chasm between "Visitors out" and the dawn light. And as I lay so, a figure came creeping in at my door—creeping on long, strangely sliding feet, and carrying in a grey, bony hand a hypodermic. The figure came close to my bed, and by a supreme miracle of will I opened my mouth and gasped my lungs full of air for a scream that would have roused the floor, if not the whole hospital—while my heavy hand moved spasmodically to grasp the bell-cord. For a while my eyes locked with the deep-set eyes in the grey face bent above me. Those eyes into which I looked were cold as the eyes of a serpent—utterly inhuman, I thought.

After awhile the eyes changed in expression. The lean, grey figure shrugged its shoulders and drew away. Then—thank God!—it left me. But I had a sort of knowledge that it meant to wait until a time when I would fail to wake.

I sounded out Miss Edgeworth about the strength of the sedative I am getting. She says it is enough to hold me, most likely, in a deep sleep all night. If I dared tell her about *last* night—but somehow I don't, after Dr. Rountree's warning. I asked my doctor, when he came, to reduce the strength of the sedative, saying I did not like to sleep so heavily it would take a great deal to waken me. He shook his head, and said I'd get over my nervous fancies, and assured me that all entrances and exits and fire escapes are

being patrolled. I doubt that. It costs money to set a patrol, and I don't think it's done in a place where a single crime has occurred. In cases of *repeated horrors*—

I mustn't let myself think of the things that may be *going* to happen. But—I doubt, anyway, if any ordinary patrol could catch the grey doctor.

*Wednesday, November 27.*

I made a last attempt to-day, and failed.

I don't know why I had hesitated to ask Dr. Rountree's intervention. Perhaps because I like him so much. When you feel yourself sinking in a horrible morass of dread and terror, there isn't much time or energy to spare for ignoring real things. Vincent Rountree has come to be a sort of symbol to me—a symbol of all that is sound and normal, humanly healthy, pityingly tender and strong. I think he likes me too; I have been studying myself in a hand mirror at times, wondering why he should—for the dark blue of my eyes look too sad with the dark blue circles worry has set beneath them. My hair is silky still and softly brown, but the natural curl has been all dragged out of it by fever and tossing, and although the eruption is not on my face, my face is white and drawn-looking.

It was late this afternoon when he stopped in for the two minutes' chat I look forward to, and the sunlight slanting in at my window had already the hazy tinge of an early winter sunset.

"Could *you* do anything, Dr. Rountree—in your capacity of house doctor—" I began.

His answer put an end to my last hope.

"Miss Wheaton, I've already tried. I suggested to your doctor—much more strongly than etiquette permits—well, the situation is delicate. He is afraid of offending the hospital authorities with no reason. If you discharged him and called another doctor, the situation would be much the same. I hope you'll try to take it as calmly as you can, for really all the patients in this hospital should be very safe now. It is true that special precautions are being taken with regard to seeing visitors out, and the like."

I did not answer. The hazy yellow sunlight was fading fast—and with it my hopes. All at once a thought had definitely formed itself in my mind: that I should not leave the hospital at all—not living. I wished that I had died of blood-poisoning. That is not so dreadful—not nearly so dreadful as some other things.

Vincent Rountree bridged the dark chasm of my thoughts, speaking almost shyly.

'I gained just one point—permission to take you out some evening soon in my car, in case you should consent to go. It would rest and refresh you——'

How grimly wrong he was in *that* surmise!

*Thursday, November 28.*

Another weary night has passed and morning come—a morning of driving rain and wind that howled around the hospital's corners like a banshee. It was a fit day for a culmination of horrors—though no day could be evil enough for the gruesome discoveries this day has brought forth.

At 7 in the morning, the hour when the day nurses relieve the night shift, I heard one of the girls crying bitterly. There was a good deal of running around, then voices raised and lowered quickly.

After half an hour or so of this, there was a silence. Such a silence as I hope never again to hear. It was like the sudden stalking of death itself into the midst of a group of agitated, sentient beings.

My heart was beating heavily as I listened alone in my room. And then I heard sound of sobbing—and of more than one person sobbing.

But a little later, I beheld an agony of grief that called to mind Gethsemane.

One of the night nurses had come to the end of the corridor where my room was—to get away from the others, I suppose. She did not see that my door was open—did not even look at it. She leaned against the wall, shaking from head to foot, making no attempt to cover her face. Her arms hung down limply, as though there was no life in them. From one hand dangled her nurse's cap. Her face was so drawn and

contorted with anguish that her own mother would not have known her, and her wide eyes seemed to stare as at a spectre. No tears came to ease her soundless, shattering sobbing.

When I could not stand it any longer, I called to the girl, and she came as though she were walking in her sleep, and stood in my door.

"Won't you please—please tell me what has happened?" I begged.

Still in that sleep-walking manner she answered me, her words sounding like the words of a thing that has been learned by heart:

"I am—I *was*—in charge of the night nursery—the little, new babies, you know. Last night after the last feeding I fell asleep. Somehow I overslept, and so no one knew what has happened until the day shift came on."

"And—what has happened?" I prompted her in spite of myself, my tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth.

"One of the babies—the youngest little baby—a little baby two days old—"

Suddenly a realization seemed to strike the girl. I was a patient. She was a nurse. She had said too much to stop now—but she mustn't tell me anything too dreadful.

"A baby was kidnapped last night," she ended lamely.

Kidnapped! It is a terrible, dreadful thing for a little baby to be kidnapped—to disappear. But I think I know—oh, yes, *I know* what blacker horror the word covered.

I have not forgotten little Rodney Penning.

#### *Afternoon*

One of the unfortunate nurse's friends came hunting for her and took her away. And all the weary, dreary day of driving rain, gloom was like an evil fog in the hospital. This time, no one can forget the tragedy for a moment. The nurses seldom talk together and if they do they seem half afraid of the sound of their own voices.

One selfish thought came to give me relief—that *now*, perhaps Dr. Smythe-Burns would sanction my removal. Perhaps—and yet, perhaps not! The web of hospital and professional etiquette is too deep for me to fathom, as it has

proved too strong for me to break. In any case, Dr. Smythe-Burns has not been in to-day, and I shall have to wait for his next visit. Another curious thing about hospital etiquette is that you can't telephone your doctor from the hospital. Anything he needs to know about you, someone else will tell him—perhaps. At anyrate, *you* can't.

As I write there is a congregation of doctors and nurses outside the closed door of the cancer patient across the way. A while ago I heard them gathered outside another door down the corridor. I wonder what can have happened to excite them—for I am sure they seem excited. At least the woman who had cancer has not disappeared, nor has she had a recurrence of pain. I saw her through her half-opened door this morning, eating a hearty breakfast.

Those worried faces outside her door grow graver and graver. Surely this one day can bear no heavier burden of evil than it has already disclosed.

I can't hear the voices across the hall. I am glad. I don't want to hear them. Those faces are too much to have seen, in their worry and—yes, *horror and fear again*. If any more black mishaps are to be known, I want to be spared them. I have almost reached the point where I can endure no more.

Now they are talking louder. I am afraid. I shall hear—*something I don't want to hear*.

"Dr. Fritz, we didn't dare pronounce in so grave a matter until we had *your opinion*—"

"And at the same time the patient in 26—the railroad accident case—"

"Both had made miraculous recoveries—pitiful, to end in this!"

"But, the coincidence!"

"Her husband will be heart-broken. Hard to tell him—but there's no possible course but immediate isolation."

"I can hardly think before to-morrow—"

"They can be sent away to-morrow. There's a small colony—"

"Could a cancer disappearing suddenly, then, take *this form*?"

"Nurse, you'd make a very imaginative research scientist.

Certainly not! And in *his* case, it was merely a railroad accident."

"But for both of them to have——"

Before writing the word that must come next, I fainted.

I had written, not everything that I heard said, but as much as I had time for. At the end I fainted—I don't know how long I have been unconscious here alone. But now I must finish—must write that horrible word:

*Leprosy!*

The grey doctor. The hypodermic filled with a strange, filthy-smelling stuff—which he intended to shoot into *my* veins, too. Dr. Zingler, the grey doctor, the grey fiend! And I mustn't speak of these horrors; of the things I am thinking—not to anyone. . . .

My hand is shaking so that I can hardly write, and I am sobbing—dry, tearing sobs like those of the nurse this morning. But mine are not soundless as hers were—I must put this book away, for I am losing all control of myself—someone is coming. . . .

*Chart of patient Marion Wheaton, November 28, 1929.*

Delirious as result of recent catastrophies in hospital. Shows mental aberration as well, however, accusing one of the house doctors of horrible and fantastic crimes. Ordered detained for observation a short while, then, failing improvement, transfer to a psychopathic institution. The house doctor who is the subject of the patient's hallucinations has been kept from her presence. Dr. Rountree is given permission to take the patient out in his car when the weather permits.

*Diary of Marion Wheaton, November 29, 10 p.m.*

I am keeping this small notebook always in the pocket of my dressing-gown now. I have a feeling that it may some day furnish important evidence—perhaps after I have been locked up in an insane asylum, or perhaps after I am dead.

The latter seems to be most likely. More and more as the moments pass, I feel that my life while I stay here is hanging by a thread. Removal, even to the hospital for the insane, would be merciful; I doubt if I shall live to know that mercy.

This evening Dr. Rountree took me for the ride which was to have calmed my nerves. Thank God, he at least knows that my mind is not unhinged. He even talks to me freely of the things which are supposed to be kept from me—and that goes far to restore my mental balance and self-confidence.

"I can't understand your feeling about Zingler," he said. "I find him a likeable chap. However—just try again, try still harder, not to refer to that feeling."

"And I know there's no reason for all this whispering behind your back. To-day, for instance—you've heard them talking all day over some new excitement, I know. As a matter of fact, it's leaked out; everyone in the hospital has heard of it. It's this. Those two patients in 19 and 26 have developed leprosy in an unheard-of manner—as though a noxious plant were to strike root in soil where it had not been sown, and to grow to maturity in the passing of a night. An unheard-of change in human tissues!"

"However, to-day's *new* mystery is merely this: the man in 26 has been removed to a leper colony; the woman in 19, however, has—disappeared."

I gave a sudden, startled cry.

"No—no!" he reassured me, quickly. "Not another murder tragedy—simply and really a disappearance. Her husband seems completely mystified; but somehow, someone has saved her from incarceration, I suppose. A pity, too, since leprosy may now often be cured."

I leaned back in my seat. The sea wind was in my face—I felt relaxed for the first time in days. But, of course—I couldn't forget the things in both our minds.

"I don't want any horrible details," I said. "But about the—the little baby, who was—kidnapped—was there, that time, any clue at all?"

Vincent Rountree nodded. "One clue, pointing to the hypothesis that the maniac may be a religious fanatic," he said shortly. "On a flat part of the roof, a sort of altar——"

I wondered. Would a doctor of medicine be likely to be a religious fanatic? Could I, after all, be wrong?

I felt myself shaking, and he felt it too as his arm touched mine.

"Try to forget!" he urged. "There are, after all, other things—things of beauty. Night—stars—the sea"—his last word was shaped soundlessly rather than spoken; I thought that it was—"you!"

He parked the car near the beach. I am able to walk with a cane now, and so I took his arm and we walked along the sand.

God! We walked along the sand!

It was I who saw first, caught against one of the dry rocks of a jetty above the level of high tide—something. Something—a hank of white fuzz in the starlight. No, not exactly fuzz. A hank, greyish white, of something like human hair.

A hank of grey-white hair, roughly or carelessly torn from a woman's head.

It was Vincent, then, who saw how the sand was tumbled and rough and uneven, in an irregular patch some six feet long and two or three feet wide. Six feet by two or three!

Both of us felt that it was necessary—a duty at least—to make sure, to investigate—to find out if there were anything hidden beneath that oblong of tumbled sand.

I waited alone at a little distance with my back turned. Vincent came to me very soon. His face was livid in the starlight, and he looked ill.

"I am a doctor, and I've seen things—" he began. Then he pulled himself together. "We'll both be called as witnesses of this, but you must come away. It—was very near the surface. It—was the woman who had cancer—who had leprosy. Her disappearance was—not an escape."

Back at the hospital, I was taken directly to my room and prepared for the night, with the usual sedative—unless, perhaps, they may have strengthened it in view of the experience I have just passed through. I have written this in bed, and will slip the book into the handkerchief pocket of the *crêpe de Chine* gown I am wearing.

The hour for "Visitors out" has passed. The hall lights are out, except the dim light from the far end of the hall and

the nearer, lurid red light that I have always disliked, as though I knew somehow that *sometime* I was to see by that light a thing that would terrify me—live through, in its glare, something more dreadful than all that has come, so far, to me myself. Is to-night the night? More than ever, I am afraid. That red light! The light of morning shining through the blood-stained skylight over the operating-room on the morning when Rodney Penning lay murdered there, must have been of such a colour.

I wish that I could stay awake—to-night of all nights.

I wish by some happy miracle I could know that for this one night that grey figure was outside the hospital walls. Does a house doctor always "sleep in".

I feel that to-night I *must* keep awake. But can I?

I cannot. I—am going. . . .

*Last entry in Marion Wheaton's hospital diary. Written between midnight and 2 a.m., November 28.*

In the little time *he* has been gone, I have been praying for mercy. I cannot feel that my prayers will be answered. Was there mercy for little Rodney Penning? For the new-born baby taken from the nursery? Was there mercy for the woman who had cancer?

There is a chance that he may overlook the small diary notebook and pencil tucked in the pocket of my night-gown with my handkerchief. In that unlikely event, this will serve as evidence.

I must hurry. At any moment he will return. He is on the roof by the skylight, and I can hear him mumbling—a sort of chant. He *has*, then, a religious mania. But the fiend is—Dr. Zingler.

I waked to find him bending over me, and I waked too late. He crammed a large handkerchief into my mouth before terror had struggled through my stupor. But to-night, he had no hypodermic.

"A large bait—*It must want a larger sacrifice,*" he was saying. And his eyes—I swear they were not human, somehow. They were as ruthlessly cruel as the eyes of a serpent.

Pressing the handkerchief down my throat so that I was

half-strangled, he dragged me from my bed and carried me down the hall. And Miss Wurt saw us—she passed by the stairs just as he started to mount them, and she saw us, and started back in horror. But she made no move to help me, only shrank away. Nor has she given any alarm, for—God pity me!—I have been strapped to the operating-table by ankles and body for fully half an hour, waiting for his return with that sharp knife he chose before he went out and somehow reached the roof and began puttering about up there—and chanting.

By turns he called me a “bait” and a “sacrifice”. Yes, the grey doctor is a fiend—a mad fiend! He will butcher me here, and I shall die trying to scream, with this gag in my mouth; I shall die in agony and terror unspeakable—and he will merely be locked up somewhere afterward.

His voice is rising as he chants. Soon, now—

He is worse than a fiend and a maniac. He is in league with supernal powers of evil.

As he chanted, I saw for a little while, through the skylight—a *Thing*. I can think of no word for it. It seemed to swoop down suddenly, as from a great distance—as though a monster had emerged from the cold abyss between the stars. And it was monster-size, so that I saw only a little part of it—and that was a sort of huge, pulsing projection which seemed to press against the skylight—and in which there was something that might have been either eye or mouth—I believe it to be both. A mouth that sees; an eye that may devour.

The grey doctor must not have expected his celestial visitant quite so soon; for I heard running feet on the roof—and now I hear him outside the door of the operating-room, fumbling with the lock. He had locked it after him. It will take but an instant—

May God—Who surely reigns supreme somewhere beyond such foul blasphemies as haunt space—have mercy on my soul!

And if this testimony is accepted, do not treat Dr. Zingler as an ordinary maniac. He is—

*Excerpt from the testimony of Nurse Wurt, following her confession.*

Of course I knew that "the grey doctor" was not Dr. Zingler, though I was on night duty and Dr. Zingler was seldom on the floor at night.

This stranger appeared—I didn't know how. He made love to me. I had never been noticed in that way before. Some women never are. The other nurses had affairs—I never.

I let him frequent my floor against the regulations. When the first crime occurred—I did not believe it was he. A little later, I would not believe it. Still later, I was afraid—afraid of him, and afraid to confess that at such a time I had been allowing the presence on my floor at night of a man utterly unknown to me—to anyone.

When he carried Miss Wheaton up the stairs, I knew—I feared—but I was afraid *then* to cry out.

*Statement of Dr. Rountree made before the Hospital Committee of Investigation.*

I am laying before the committee the confession of the Grey Killer, as he has come to be called—or "The Grey Doctor", as Miss Wheaton called him—poor girl, when to peril of her life the hospital authorities saw fit to add the peril of being judged insane. It will be remembered that no confession could be forced from the Killer by the police; that I alone was able to obtain his remarkable statement, spurred by my anxiety to substantiate the statement made in those lines written in Miss Wheaton's diary on the operating-table. Those lines have been called "ravings". And out of the regard I had come to have for Miss Wheaton while she was a patient here and out of deep confidence I felt in her judgment, I determined to seek corroboration for those very statements which must naturally appear the most insupportable.

Her confusion of the Killer, whose confession is appended below, with Dr. Zingler, is most natural. She had never seen Dr. Zingler, and after she had encountered and conceived a horror of the Killer, Dr. Zingler was kept from her room. She naturally felt assured that Miss Wurt would have

known of the habitual presence of any stranger, and so accepted the Killer's statement as to his identity.

Out of the depths of my anxiety to substantiate Miss Wheaton's story, I have done a difficult thing—approached the Killer in the guise of a friend. I obtained—a confession. And before this confession is judged to be utterly beyond the bounds of possibility, I will ask urgently that two things be explained away—*the feet of the Killer—and his manner of cheating the law.*

### *The Confession*

Never again shall I return home, and it is all in vain. Nevertheless, easily can I escape the pit into which I have dug my way. There is always the ultimate way out.

Even to me, who can regard all of the race of Earth as so many stupid cattle, the enmity that surrounds me now grows heavy to bear. Also, why should one suffer punishment and death at the hands of inferiors? But before I enter the great oblivion I will give my story to Dr. Rountree, who alone has dealt with me as with a man of knowledge, and not a crazy man whose wits have gone astray.

Know, then, that my home is not upon Earth, but rather on Horil, satellite which circles a sun that burns beyond the narrow limits of this galaxy. Is the planet Earth then unknown to the dwellers of Horil? No, for the astronomers of Horil compare with those of Earth as Earth's greatest astronomer might compare with a child with an opera glass.

On Horil, I was for eleven centuries high priest to the Devil-God of Space. (I approximate terms familiar to men of Earth.) We of Horil believe that a great Power of Good has created all things, and that He is opposed by a lesser Power of Evil. But we worship at no shrine to an Unknown God on Horil—and the Devil-God of Space is very real, and one of the most dreaded of those strange beings that infest the trackless ether.

Its characteristics? As to form of worship, a love of human sacrifice. To many an altar on Horil It has descended, to snatch thence living food.

Its form and nature?

The biologists of Horil are far in advance of those of Earth,

as you shall see. Yet even they do not understand the nature of the great denizens of Space. They may breathe ether—they may be forms of vibral energy, and know no need to breathe, being electro-chemical in their nature. But—whether or not the Devil-God breathes—It *eats*.

As to form—here is a coincidence for the philosophers of Earth to ponder, parallel to that phenomenon by which unrelated races of the Earth find for the same things names built on similar phonetic principles. The form of the Devil-God of Horil and of Space resembles that of the monster of the deep which men on Earth have named the devil-fish. Miss Wheaton described truly the appearance of one of its monster tentacles, and she was right in her surmise that the orifice on the end serves both as mouth and eye.

So. My deity was a being of definite power and substance, of knowledge of the far corners of the universe, and of great evil. To Horil It may have been drawn by the psychic nature of our people. We have grown mighty in knowledge while retaining habits common on Earth only to the most primitive races. Cannibalism is practised universally on Horil. The Devil-God loves human sacrifice and the slaying of men and women. Hence the Devil-God came to haunt the altars of Horil, its temples and the hearts of its men and women. You of Earth would say that evil attracts evil.

And for eleven centuries I was Its high priest. On Horil the only death comes by way of cannibalism, or an occasional suicide, since we have done away with accidental death. Yet, sooner or later, men on Horil die. It is one's turn to furnish food for others, or life grows weary—so does life equalize itself among those who might otherwise become immortal; balancing knowledge and character of destructive traits, perhaps, that the eternal plan of the great Unknown be not thwarted. . . .

But this is not to the point.

At last I offended the Devil-God. I stole from his altar—well, she was beautiful, and the grey pallor of her skin was like the early dawn-light. Love is rare on Horil—but it had me in its grip.

After I had loosed her from the altar we dared not go into the City—she would have been returned to the altar, and

I should have furnished a feast for the royal family. We fled into the barren places. And the Devil-God, returning to Its altar, saw us and overtook us in a great, empty, stony field. There *she*, the beloved, was seized and devoured before my eyes. And I—

No such mercy was intended for the faithless high priest of the altar of human sacrifice. I was caught up—gently—in one of the monster tentacles. The wide, barren plain lit by the cold stars fell away beneath me—shrunk to the size of a handkerchief. An entire hemisphere of Horil lay like a saucer holding the sky—then shrank too, and fell away. My senses left me, and the breath of my nostrils. Then—

I was lying in a field on the planet Earth, which I soon recognized by the customs and types of its inhabitants, from my knowledge of schoolroom astronomy. How did I survive the journey through space? Who knows? Ask of the Devil-God, Which has—perhaps—no words for all Its knowledge.

I would not starve—I, an eater of human flesh. But here another thing must be explained. On Horil we prepare human flesh for consumption. Countless centuries ago our epicures evolved a taste for the flesh of leprous persons. Through constant usage, we have come to eat no other flesh—and by some physiological idiosyncrasy, our stomachs became unadapted to other flesh. I can eat non-leprous flesh—but it inflicts on me fearful pangs of nausea.

Our biologists, then, developed a specific which implants a swift-growing culture of leprosy in any flesh into which it is injected—and which at the same times cures and restores all bodily tissues suffering from any other injury. So our health is safeguarded. And hence the cure of the man in 26, and the woman in 19, who had cancer. Hence the sudden development of leprosy in these patients. For they were to give me needed food.

Hence, the buried and mutilated body in the sand. I was starving, famished.

The sacrifices on the roof altar, on the other hand, were sacrifices of propitiation; but the improvised “fish-hooks”—

I madly hoped to snare the Devil-God I served—as men on Earth of primitive tribes, so I have heard, turn upside down the images of their saints to force them to do their

bidding. But I dared more—hoping literally to hook the monster with steel barb and cable.

Two sacrifices It scorned.

Driven by hunger, I had prepared my necessary feast. The girl with deep blue eyes that grew sad and terrified as they gazed on me was my first selection. Obedient to a true instinct, however, she shunned me. So I prepared the man and the woman for myself—and sacrificed the children.

Then a new thought came to me. My sacrifices had been too small. They should have matched my own necessity. I determined to raise once more an altar on the roof, and to fasten to it the slain body of the girl with the terrified eyes.

I crept upon her as she slept at last a sleep so deep that the sense of my nearness failed to rouse her, as it had done before. I carried her from her room, half-smothering her as her sad eyes implored. Even to me, she was pitifully beautiful; the better to allure the Monster-God of Space.

I conveyed her—as she wrote down—to the operating-room, and strapped her to the table—leaving free her hands, since she had little strength and could not loose herself with her body fastened flat to the table, and I had need to hasten.

I offered up my prayers upon the roof—the prayers I had made before the altars of Horil through eleven centuries.

The Being—the Master—swooped down out of the “empty” skies—the “empty” skies that teem with the Unseen and the Unknowable.

I hastened back from the roof, to the operating-room. I threw myself, knife in hand, upon the operating-table—

And I was seized from behind!

Miss Wurt at last had dared to give the alarm. No sacrifice was made upon the roof again. And I was taken captive—though soon I shall escape.

*Comment by the Superintendent of R—— Hospital, signed before witnesses at the request of Dr. Rountree and Marion Wheaton.*

The “Confession” of the unknown man captured almost in the act of murdering Miss Wheaton upon an operating-table in our hospital is beyond credence.

Nevertheless, I hereby testify to two things. The Killer's entrances and exits were made through unnoticed back windows which were not near stairs or fire-escapes. This was possible, because he *scaled* the walls of the building—not climbing them, but *walking up them*. When his shoes were removed, his feet appeared as long segments of the bodies of serpents—and they could grip and scale any kind of wall. His feet, he said, were as the feet of all "human" beings on Horil; and "on Earth" his shoes were made specially, and his feet were coiled within these shoes!

Likewise the manner of his suicide is beyond explanation. He had been searched and was guarded carefully, of course, and he died—simply by holding his breath. No living thing on Earth has been known to do this thing, since at a certain degree of weakness the will is replaced by automatic functions.

To the physiologic norm of no known species of Earth could the Killer conform.



## Guardians of the Guavas

CHARLES HENRY MACKINTOSH

"No, I really mean it, Jim!" Jack Hoxton sat up in the long cane chair on the Country Club veranda, the better to emphasize his earnestness. "I haven't lost my money, or been rejected by my best girl; indeed, there's no best, or worst, girl to be considered in my case; and the plain fact is I'm sick of civilization—fed up. I'm sailing for the Hawaiian Islands on the next Dollar Line boat!"

Jim Worthington stirred sufficiently in his long chair to regard the flushed face of his young friend quizzically. "Who has been introducing you to the semi-centennial works of Robert Louis Stevenson? Don't you know that the Hawaiian Islands are now at least as civilized as Iowa? You're a quarter of a century too late to take refuge from civilization in Hawaii. Better sail farther and fare worse!"

"Oh, I know that Honolulu and Hilo, and places like that, are as civilized as Chicago or Atlantic City; but there must be places on the islands where a fellow can buy a few acres, run up a shack, and lead the simple life, along with the silence, the scenery, the sunshine, and the tropical fruits and flowers."

"Well, I wish you the best of luck, if you really mean it; but, just for the sake of having a sporting interest in your venture, I'll bet you an even thousand that you'll be sicker of silence and scenery within one year than you are now of civilization after—how old are you?—twenty-seven years of it."

"I'll just take that bet. Your thousand will probably come in mighty handy to pay for some pet improvement on my Hawaiian place, a year from now."

"Better catch your place before you start to 'civilize' it; but the bet's on. Now, is it agreed that you are to write to me regularly and keep me informed as to how near I am getting to winning, or losing, that thousand?"

"Well, Jim, old stay-at-home, this is my first solemn written warning from Aloha Land that you are surely going to lose that thousand! You should have felt a premonitory pang in the region of the pocket-book about two weeks ago, when *I found my place!* It's only about a dozen miles from Honolulu—you'll hoot at that!—but it might be a hundred for all one sees or knows of the city from here. The great Koolau Range runs behind the city, and cut it off from the windward side of the island of Oahu with a three thousand foot wall of rock. 'Wall' is the right word, too; it rises as nearly perpendicular as any formation can be that has been exposed to erosion for a thousand years or so. It's all solid lava; probably thrust up by some gigantic volcanic action long ago. Its sides are furrowed with gullies, and buttressed with shoulders built up of the eroded material; and that makes it look climbable—and it is, for perhaps one-third of the way up. One might even scramble up another third, by picking a particularly likely spot; but the final third would defy a chamois, or a Swiss mountaineer unless he cut his own steps in the solid rock ahead of himself. There are dark patches, just above the line of possible climbability, that look as if they might be the mouths of caves, caused by deeper erosion in softer strata; but no one will ever know whether they are caves unless he flies in an airplane close enough to look down and into them; and no level-headed aviator is likely to try that, with a variable trade wind pouring itself against the base of the wall, and zooming up straight to the Pearly Gates!

"Why so much about my Wall?—I call the mighty Koolau Range 'my wall', because it is both my barrier against civilization, and the background for all my 'silence and scenery'. My place is about a mile and a half from the base of the Wall. It's on a hill about five hundred feet high; in fact, it *is* the hill. I've bought the whole thing, with a fence around it, running down to a mountain stream at the base.

"I'm building my house right on the crest of the hill, with a big veranda—they call 'em 'lanai' out here—facing the Wall. I've already roughed out a trail down the hillside through the wild guavas to the stream, where there's a fine swimming-hole fifty or sixty feet long, a dozen wide, and four or five deep. The whole hillside is covered with wild guava bushes at

present, but I'll have most of them grubbed out by the time I've won your thousand; and with that I'll buy papaias, banana and coco-nut palms, mangoes, and the rest; so that in a couple of years more I'll be independent of civilization entirely, except to buy an occasional shirt or pair of shorts, which is all I wear out here."

"I've been grubbing guavas all day in the hot sun; but it must be a month since last I wrote you a warning that your thousand is already as good as deposited to my account with the First National Bank of Bishop; so I'll see if a change of employment really is as good as a rest. It's amazing what a few weeks of steady work will do with a place like this. My house is finished. It's mostly studio living-room, with a little kitchen, bedroom and bath. I've cleared off the whole of the top of my hill and sown it to grass, with a few flowering shrubs to set off the house and break the fence corners. Now I'm clearing a three-foot trail through the wild guavas down the face of my hill toward the Wall.

"You should see it—the Wall, I mean! It's never twice the same, what with the drifting clouds and the shifting shadows. There are always half a dozen rainbows arched over its buttresses or woven through the clouds around the peaks. It's a tremendous thing to have right in one's own backyard! I stop grubbing guavas, half a hundred times a day, to turn towards it and drink it all in. Reminds me of that old psalm: 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills; whence cometh my strength.'

"Something seems to flow down from those jagged peaks, sure enough. Maybe it's streams of prana—vital energy—and the menehunes manufacture it in those caves I told you about in my first letter. Menehunes, by the way, are Hawaiian fairies; or perhaps it would be more accurate to call them gnomes. All the old Hawaiians believe in them. Say they've been seen, many a time. Describe them as being a foot or two tall, with long beards, all dressed in the old Hawaiian style.

"There was a bit in one of the Honolulu papers the other

day about the children at one of the public schools seeing a real live menehune during the noon recess. They all said he was about a foot high, with a long grey beard, and that he went by, grumbling to himself, and eating peanuts out of a paper bag. That paper bag sort of spoils the picture, doesn't it? Sounds too civilized for a menehune. But, anyway, all the children—and there was about a dozen of them, of all races—swore that they really saw him. An hour or so after the paper was out all the old Hawaiians were down there in the school grounds helping the children to hunt for the menehune!

"Well, I'm afraid I've been too thoroughly civilized to take much stock of menehunes; but the scenery and the silence are sure going great. I'll be a new man in less than a year's time; but you can count on my being enough of my old self to claim that thousand promptly when it's due!"

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"You are going to win your thousand, after all, Jim; and if it were ten, you'd win it just the same. I am writing this from a private hospital for 'mental cases', here in Honolulu; but I'm not mad, old man, not that; and just as soon as the doctor thinks that my nerves are calm enough, I'll be boarding the first boat for the mainland. I suppose I should wait and tell you all about it then; but I've another week or two to put in here before they'll let me leave, and it will pass the time, and be a sort of a relief to tell you in this way, writing a bit at a time and then resting.

"I scarcely know how to begin. The whole thing must sound so incredible to one who hasn't actually gone through it. I'm sure I wouldn't have believed it myself, a month ago; and when I tried to explain to the doctor here how my nerves got in such a condition, he merely gave me a soothing murmur, and something to put me to sleep! But it's true, I tell you, old man, every word of it! Well, I'd better just go back to the beginning and let the tale tell itself:

"It began one night about three weeks ago, when I was sitting on my lanai, facing the huge dark bulk of the Wall a mile and a half away, and smoking my pipe peacefully. I would sit there almost every night, admiring the moonlight

view of range and valley; but that night there was no moon, only a powdering of star-dust across the sky making the scene faintly visible. The old Wall loomed up black as a thunder-cloud; and, as I kept my eyes turned towards it, idly, I fancied I saw blue-green lights glowing here and there, about a third of the way from the crest. I thought of those caves I told you about, and wondered whether anyone could possibly be living in them. Then I recalled how utterly inaccessible they appeared in full daylight, and dismissed the notion from my mind. The blue-green lights persisted, however, and the longer I watched them the more clearly they seemed to demark the entrances to the caves, as I had mentally placed them from many observations. The idea came to me, as I puffed my pipe, that maybe they really were inhabited by menehunes, making their old magic over there where man couldn't get near them. Then I began to wonder again whether a man couldn't manage to scramble up the wooded scarp to one of the larger openings, which I had particularly noted, because it was the only one that seemed to present climbable possibilities. Just then the full moon came out, flooding valley and Wall with light no less powerful than that during a half-eclipse of the sun, and curiously like that in quality. So came my crazy notion to hike over to the Wall in the moonlight, and tackle the climb to the cave.

"The blue-green light had been blotted out by the moon, but it was there a minute before, and that seemed to say that whoever, or whatever, inhabited the cave would surely be at home. Like a fool, I didn't even stop to get my flash-light, though I should have remembered that there are always heavy clouds over and around the Koolau Range; and I might have anticipated that the moonlight would fail me before I could complete that three-mile hike, with the climb in the middle of it.

"The moon shone steadily while I crossed the wide valley, following the cow trails through the wild guava, and coming to the open grass land, sloping up to the Wall, where the going was even easier. It couldn't have taken me much more than half an hour from the time the notion seized me till I was beginning my scramble up the steep face of the scarp. I was soon sorry that I hadn't changed to breeches and boots,

instead of starting out in the shirt and shorts I'd been wearing all day to work on my trail; those lava needles and guava roots were surely hard on the naked calves and thighs. I cut myself pretty badly once or twice, and must have lost quite a lot of blood without realizing it. However, I wasn't going to be turned back by a little thing like that; so up I went, pulling myself up two-thirds of my own height, here and there, by holds on guava roots, and having to work a way around many a place where the rock face was sheer perpendicular, with no holds for hands or feet.

'It was much more of a climb than I had anticipated, but I couldn't quit when I must be only a few hundred feet at most from my goal. I looked back for a moment, with one foot on a lava needle and one hand on a guava root, and I was amazed to see how high I had come. The Wall, and the steep slopes, fell away into the moonlight valley beneath me with what looked like an unbroken drop of a third of a mile. Over across the valley, and far beneath the spot where I clung, I could see the lights of my own home on the little hill. I was feeling fairly well done in, what with the hard day's work and the steep climb to which my muscles were not yet accustomed, and then the loss of blood may have weakened me somewhat. How I wished I were back in my comfortable chair, under those lights on the lanai! I wished it more than ever, a moment later; really wished it, as a drowning man must wish for air; for just then the moon went out. It went out just as if a giant hand had reached up and turned off the switch, but, when I strained my eyes up into the dark, I could see a very faint luminosity still there, behind a bank of black cloud which seemed to reach from the Wall to the sea. I remembered that cloud too late. Almost every night I had seen it drift in from the ocean till it blanketed the valley from midnight till dawn. It must have been just about midnight at that moment, and there was I, in almost black darkness, hanging to a guava root above a drop of a third of a mile!

'I think my nerve began to crack at that moment; but the one thing that I couldn't possibly do was to stay where I was until morning. Already I felt my damp hand slipping on the smooth guava root. I must move, up or down, and I already knew only too well the impossible danger in the darkness of

the way over which I had come in the bright moonlight. It's always easier to climb up than down, anyway, feeling for one's holds with the naked hand rather than with the shod foot.

"I don't know how long I climbed through the terrible blackness, or how far. It seemed an age, and a mile or more, but it was probably less than an hour, and I doubt whether I had gained much more than fifty feet on the perpendicular, under the almost impossible conditions of the climb. I was beginning to crack with fatigue, too. Each upward inch seemed to call for the last possible ounce of vital energy, and still there was always another ounce for the next inch. It couldn't last, though, and I caught myself deliberately contemplating the possibility of letting go and dropping away from all this unendurable labour into the peace of the valley.

"I couldn't do it. We may think such thoughts, but our bodies won't let us surrender to them while there is a spark of vitality left. The end came soon enough anyway. I had tested the guava root with almost the whole weight of my body, while my left foot rested firmly enough on another, but, as I swung free on it, there was a tearing sound that sent a clammy claw clutching down on my heart muscles. They tell you that men falling from great heights relive their lives in a flash, like drowning men. It may be so with some, but my mind was a blank, an aching void, as my body arched back and shot into the blackness. I believe I gave one shrill scream, but I'm not sure of that. Then—and I've no idea how long it was, since a second can contain eternity under such conditions—I crashed, and the world went away from all my senses.

"Gradually I became conscious of a kind of blue-green luminosity surrounding me. I remember wondering whether I had fallen into the sea, and my body was lying in some deep, cool, coral cave. Absurd, of course, the sea was miles away. The moon must have come out again. I looked up, and saw above a roof of rough rock. I realized that I was lying across a sloping shoulder of the same substance, my legs straddling it, my arms hanging down on either side of its curved surface, while the not too rounded peak of that bit into my backbone. Next I realized that I was stark naked; my shirt and shorts must have been ripped away in the fall. . . . I remembered

the fall. So I was still alive, and this must be some rocky cleft which had caught and rolled me back under its overhanging roof.

"I was alive! I started to lift my arms, intending to move to a more comfortable position, and it was then that real fear caught at my throat and heart, for I was *chained*, chained to the rock at neck, wrist, thigh and ankle, with thin sharp chains, strong as steel, that bit into my flesh at the least movement. Only the neck chain, being just above the collar-bones, allowed me to lift my head a little and peer about me into the weird blue-green luminosity, seeking a cause for my condition, yet fearing to find it.

"I saw that this was no mere cleft in the rock, but a long wide cavern with a low roof. Directly before the rock to which I was chained there was a sort of rock throne, tiny, but large enough for the grotesque figure which occupied it. He was, perhaps, two feet high. A lei of brightly-coloured flowers hung around his scrawny throat, and was lost beneath his long grey beard. He wore a colourful waist-cloth, nothing more. His right hand held a spear about the size of a clothyard arrow.

"Surrounding him, in a half-moon, but at a respectful distance behind, there was a countless crowd of similar figures; some bearded and grey, some smooth-faced, lithe and young; all dressed in the same manner as their king—for such I took the seated figure to be—and all armed with tiny weapons.

"Could this be a primitive race of Hawaiian pygmies, still surviving unknown to modern man, hidden away in these almost inaccessible caves? Or—the truth flashed across my mind, to be dismissed as surest folly—could it be true, after all, about the menehunes, the fairy people, and had I fallen into their power? But surely fairy people would be gentle and kindly! They would not crucify a stranger in chains upon their rocks, and stare at him with hard, cold, unwinking brown eyes! Yet perhaps they hated the white man and his crushing civilization. Did I not hate it, too? I must tell them that, explain that I had fled from it to their own land; and then their faces would glow with warm friendliness, and they would hasten to release the chains.

"Before I could speak there came a voice so high and thin

that I seemed to be hearing it inside my own head rather than through my ears; yet I knew that it came from the seated figure, and I marvelled that its English was as perfect as my own at its best.

" 'Stranger, you venture to question our hospitality?'

"A guess; a logical deduction; or had he read my thought?

"Prompt came the reply: 'Your thought speaks to me as mine to you; and now I will put to you another question, although without expectation that you will answer it honestly: What are the limitations of hospitality? Shall a host suffer his guest to destroy his property and even the persons of those placed in his charge, yet withhold his hand because of the claims of hospitality?'

"What was the meaning of this mad rigmarole?—I was not his guest, nor he my host; but, even if we stood in that relation, certainly I had destroyed none of his property, nor injured the persons of any of his people. . . . Yet might I, perhaps, have done so in a mad delirium, following my fall? Was that why I came back to consciousness to find myself in chains?

"Again he read my thought. 'You have done no harm, except to yourself, since you came to this place. You have my young men to thank that the harm was no greater. They caught you as you fell, and brought you here to me with nothing but a few scratches and bruises.'

"I started to stammer my thanks, forgetting my chains for the moment; but I was interrupted coldly: 'The words were not well supplied. You owe us no thanks for your broken fall, because we drew you here and gave you the opportunity to fall. You believe it to have been your own idea, born of moonlight and curiosity; but it came to you across the valley from this cave, carried on the blue-green radiance which first attracted your attention. We summoned you here to our court because a judgment has been passed upon you, and it is necessary to its right execution that you shall know what it is, and whence it came, and why.'

"I forgot my chains, and they bit savagely at my flesh as I attempted to rise in my indignation. 'What kind of court is this, that passes judgment in the absence of the defendant, without hearing his plea or admitting evidence?'

"It is a court in which no mental evasions are at all possible," the voice replied, more mildly than before, though perhaps it only seemed so in contrast to my own hotness. "Your crimes were committed before our very eyes. Day after day, hundreds of us have seen and by thought power have tried to check your mad destructiveness; but it seemed that you responded to our impulses only by swinging your blade faster and harder!"

"What, in God's name, could this lunatic be talking, or, rather, thinking about! He answered me in two words: 'The guavas!' and I laughed aloud. It was a mad thing to do, for the little old man seemed serious enough; but the idea of being charged with the murder of wild guava bushes!

"My ill-judged mirth quite altered the quality of the voice that continued to ring in my head. No longer had it even the slightest suggestion of a thin silver flute, as before, but rather that of an angry bumblebee.

"Your laughter is evidence of the incredible obtuseness of your blundering, destructive, murdering breed. In your blind arrogance, you have at last succeeded in persuading yourselves that you may destroy what and where you will, so that it serves your comfort, your pleasure, or your greed!"

"But I *own* the place on which I have been clearing away the guavas!" I burst in indignantly.

"'You *own* it?' The voice came high and incredulous. 'By what superior right do you claim personal ownership of any part of the King's domain, granted in common to His children in return for their loving labour upon it?'"

"What king are you talking about?" I demanded petulantly. I understand that Hawaii is a part of the Republic of the United States. No king has any rights here!"

"Him whom we call the King has His rights everywhere on land and sea and in the air. He is the King of the World . . . but enough of that; your thoughts no less than your actions proclaim that you know Him not. What of this absurd claim to ownership which you advance in defence of your murderous invasions upon our sacred charges, the guavas? If any truly own that land, must it not be the elemental spirits that co-operated to create the soil, the earthworms that prepared it for plant food, the guavas themselves, that laboriously

builded it into the tissues of their living bodies—why have they not better title to the land than you? They have been there for half a century, and you for little more than one moon!'

"'But I bought and paid for the place!' I protested with half-incredulous resentment.

"'From what Great Chief did you buy it? With what act of splendid service did you pay for it?'

"My temper was tiring of this incredible conversation. 'I bought it from the legal owner, and paid for it in hard, cold American dollars, I answered shortly, realizing, as I spoke, that my adjectives had not been well chosen.

"Sure enough, he repeated them: 'Hard, cold; but the hard may be softened and the cold warmed by the White Flame, whose ministers and servants we are.'

"Fortunately I had already learned that the ancient Hawaiians—those of them who were deemed worthy of initiation into their Mysteries—worship the White Flame of the eternal life force; or I might have taken that last statement as a threat of ordeal by fire. Perhaps it would have been more pleasant, after all, than what actually came.

"'Pain, and Fear of pain,' said the voice. 'Thus does the White Flame burn the dross out of the brains of beings like yourself, corrupted by the false sense of the self separated from the One Self. We may not kill'—I drew a breath of relief at that statement—'we may not ourselves execute the judgment of the guavas upon your person, but, fortunately for the occasion, we have humbler ministers who are not so bound.' He pronounced a name which I could not spell if I could remember it; but my renewed apprehension prevented me even from paying attention to it. What terror would be loosed upon me now?

"In the utter silence of the cavern, there came to my strained sense of hearing a sound as of the scratching of innumerable tiny claws upon the rock. Crabs? Spiders? What—an army of them? I felt a scratching at my left ankle, a procession of tiny claws rhythmically climbing to the bone.

"Pressing my throat to the utmost against its chain, I saw that which had never before existed even in my imagination. It was almost a foot in length, jetty black, glistening black,

as though carved out of polished hard rubber, yet every inch, every atom of its contours was tremendously, horribly alive. The sense of the vitality packed into that small compass was shocking. I saw it more clearly as it drew its dreadful length across my kneecap. It had a head, but no face. Its body was simply a procession of tiny claws mounted in black knobs which moved with the regularity of some mechanical thing. Up my thigh, and to my chest just below the throat, it came, and there it paused.

"We note with surprise that you are not already acquainted with our little friend," said the voice with what seemed to me to be dreadful irony. "Were you an Hawaiian, with some knowledge of the land you presume to claim, you would have torn those chains deeply into your own flesh at the sight of him, before you could recall that you were chained—and you *are* chained, you know."

"What is it?" I croaked.

"The response was disconcertingly prompt: 'It is the one being in this land of love—excluding those like yourself who are here by fraud or by force—which rules and conquers all—even Man—by Fear. It is the Great Centipede.'

"A centipede!—but those were tiny pallid things never more than an inch or so in length. This giant, waving his blind tentacles almost at my throat, and opening and closing his mighty tail shears with clearly audible sound, was no true centipede, but rather a ghastly nightmare of one, seen through a blackened and disordered brain, magnified a millionfold!"

"It is not a vision," said the voice, with gentle insistence; "it is an actual being, as you shall soon have ample cause to know."

"So my fate was to be—stinging to death by this hateful and malodorous insect! I felt a cold wind blow between the epidermis and the dermis all over my body, and I fancied I could hear the hair at the base of my head creak as it rose on end!"

"As though obeying some unspoken command, the nightmare insect renewed its rhythmical march, across my throat, over my chin, and paused again only when its blindly waving tentacles seemed to command a view of my face.

"Look closely; look well, O king of the centipedes!" said

the voice; 'for this one lies under the curse of the centipedes. Let it follow him, let it pursue him, till he be frenzied with fear: this for the harm he has wrought; let it follow, let it pursue till he lift the curse of his presence from our land, and so—and only so—lift the curse from himself! This for the harm that must not be wrought by him!'

"As the voice ceased, the mighty insect deliberately turned about. For a second I saw the glistening plier-jaws with which its tail was armed, waving threateningly beneath my very nose; then it resumed its rhythmical march over my chin, coming again to my throat, where it paused, apparently with its head about over one carotid artery and its terrible tail over the other. Now, if the insect were indeed as deadly as the voice had suggested it to be, and if it were to be the instrument of my destruction, it was in position to spread its venom swiftly throughout the blood stream.

"The pause lengthened out interminably, while the cavern was caught in breathless silence. Not alone my nerves were at unbearable tension, but every tendon was tightly stretched, every muscle rock-hard, tensed to receive, and, if possible, to endure I knew not what fiendish shock of awful agony. This waiting, surely, was worse than the event could possibly be! Why did not the accursed insect do its deadly work?—or was it, perhaps, awaiting the final command from the king of the menehunes?

"That command came, like the crack of a tiny pistol shot in the stillness. It was, I think, the same word with which the awful insect had been summoned; but, once again, my nervous tension was too great for me to pay attention to anything but that. Instinctively, as the command came, I drew still tighter the already terrible tension of nerve and tendon and muscle. Something seemed to snap. There was a flashing blaze of blue-white brilliance; then blackness, instantaneous and absolute.

"I seemed to drift upward to the surface of the sea of consciousness through miles of blue-green water; but always with the same horrible sensation of something dreadful and unclean clinging about my throat. The light grew clearer, yellower. I became conscious of my limbs pressing into the

woven cane of—the chair on my own lanai. I was there; and dawn was just breaking over the Needles in the east—but these facts were verbalized later. For the time I was frightfully conscious only of one sensation—there *was* something, clammy, and close-clinging, like a necklace of tiny tiger claws, about my throat!

"With a shrill scream, I leapt to my feet. Perhaps the scream, the vibration in my throat, was what saved me, for I have learned since that these deadly insects are apt to clamp down instinctively upon feeling a sudden loss of support. There was a scratching thud on the cement floor of the lanai; and there at my feet, eight or ten inches of liquid legs churned and thrashed in blind semi-circles. Then it straightened out, and flowed—toward me!—for all the world like a thick streak of black oil flowing down a steeply sloping floor.

"My first instinct was to leap upon it with my shod feet, and it was then that I realized that my feet were *not* shod; that my body was as naked as it had been in the cavern. You will say—as the doctor said—that it was all a dream, brought on by the actual contact of the real centipede's claws; but how will you account for this fact: that I was stark naked; my clothes were gone, and I have never found them to this day? Realizing my defenceless condition, I made no further move toward the terror, you may well believe. Instead, I dashed for the door faster than I have ever run before; yet, fast though I ran, the cursed creature was at my heels as I slammed the door between myself and it, and sank, with deep sobbing breaths, into an easy-chair.

"God, what a ghastly experience! Dream, nightmare, or not—and I did not stop to analyse then—at least there was the fact of that giant centipede on the doorstep outside. If this lovely country was infested with such terrors, would it not prove more of a purgatory than a paradise? I seemed to hear the baffled horror scratching, scratching with its tiny terrible claws at my door—and there *was* a scratching, louder and louder as I listened intently; but it was not at the door—it was, it was on the back of the chair in which I lay exhausted!

"I leapt to my feet again, and in the clear light of dawn, saw *another*—or could it possibly be the same?—giant centipede just flowing over the head-rest, where my head had rested a

half-second ago! I sped to my bedroom. I slammed the door. I stuffed ties and handkerchiefs into the crack beneath it, and into every opening through which it seemed that even an ant could make its way. I threw back the bedclothes, and —yes, I had sensed that it would be inevitable—but not one, *two* of the giant centipedes lay coiled together just under the front edge of the pillow!

"At the sight, surprisingly enough, I lost my fear for the moment, and grew cold with rage. I seized the first weapon that came to hand—it happened to be a shoe—and brought it down with terrific force upon both of them. It seemed impossible to kill them. I seemed to pound and pound at them for hours. Even after they were ground into the sheet, ruining it for ever, still flickers and tremors of horrible vitality shook the fragments as though they would again unite and attack me! After that, I stripped the bed, turned the mattress, and lay down under the single upper sheet after shaking it till I almost tore the hem. I lay there, but not to sleep. No sooner would I close my eyes, than I would see armies of giant centipedes flowing toward me through the darkness, and I would start up with a half-suppressed scream.

"Fortunately there was but an hour or so of that. My Japanese servant came at seven. Had he been late that morning he might have found a madman for a master! As it was, I was dangerously irritable. I cursed him for a sloven, in permitting these poisonous pests to get foothold in my house. In vain he protested that he had seen none of the great centipedes; that they were, indeed, exceedingly rare, and that one might live a lifetime in the islands and never see one. Had I not seen four—no, *five*, counting the one in the cavern! —during that very night of horror? I seized the sheet and found the dreadful remains of my battle and shook it in his face.

"'See! See for yourself!' I screamed, rather than spoke.

"He examined the remains carefully, and shook his head. 'That danger,' he said, 'most danger'—bite, swell up, mebbe die, dunno.'

"But the sole effect of the ocular demonstration was that I lost my Japanese servant. He slipped away shortly before noon, and I never saw him again.

"Well, I dare not, for my own sake, retrace the details of

the next three days. They were one continuous nightmare, with the added horror of knowing clearly that one was wide awake. Whenever I turned, wherever I turned, my eyes would fall upon one of these poisonous pests. I went about armed with a tightly-rolled magazine, and got so that I would strike out as I turned without waiting to verify the presence of the pest. That was how all my crockery got broken. When my neighbour called—as he did near to the end of the third day—it was that fact that made him so sure that I must have been drinking the native 'oke' to the verge of delirium tremens. I told him the whole tale as calmly as possible; but that only served to increase his conviction. He suggested that I had better let him take me to town in his car—said he knew a doctor, knew the very place for me. I consented, not because I needed a doctor, but just to get away.

'I might have known that I couldn't get away so easily as that. The curse of the centipedes was clearly in my mind. Not till I left—not till I leave—these islands shall I be free from it. There was one waiting for me on the pillow of the hospital bed. It slipped away, like a streak of black oil, as I struck at it, and vanished through some crack in the base boarding. It was gone when the doctor and the nurse turned at my scream. I showed them where it had been, and where I thought it had gone. They were interested, and sympathetic—too much so. I could see that they were infected by the belief of my neighbour, the one who had brought me to the hospital. The doctor says I shall be all right in a few days, or a week or two at most; but I know better. The fact that these omnipresent centipedes never seem to bite has brought a certain dull apathy into my feeling about them; and yet I have a certain inner sense that warns me to hold to my resolve to leave the islands as soon as I can, or a secondary stage of the curse may manifest!'

"I have sold my place at a great sacrifice. In fact, it brought me just a little over the thousand I shall pay you when I see you in a couple of weeks' time."

Dear Mr. Worthington: The enclosed letter, or manuscript, was found under the pillow of the bed occupied by your friend, Mr. John Hoxton, during his stay here at the hospital. As

you already know from our cables, he was found dead by the night nurse, and when the body was lifted from the bed, a giant centipede was crushed around the back of his neck. The virus appears to have entered at the carotids, and, in the enfeebled state of the patient, death must have followed very quickly. It is indeed strange that his amazing illusion should have been brought to a conclusion by a real insect of the type he feared; and it is the more to be regretted, because Dr. Benson was very hopeful of a complete cure. Just the day before, he had succeeded in convincing Mr. Hoxton that he must remain and fight and defeat this fear here in the islands, or it would leave a permanent psychopathic complex.

THE END









